ISRAEL'S IRON AGE.

SKETCHES FROM THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES.

MARCUS DODS, D.D.

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OR

Sketches from the

PERIOD OF THE JUDGES.

BY

MARCUS DODS, D.D.

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I.

JOSHUA.

"*Of the cities of these people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth: but thou shalt utterly destroy them; . . . that they teach you not to do after all their abominations.*"—Deut. xx. 16.

"*But ye have not obeyed my voice: why have ye done this? Wherefore I also said, I will not drive them out from before you; but they shall be as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare unto you.*"—Judges ii. 2, 3.

"*Executing thy judgments upon them by little and little, thou gavest them place of repentance, not being ignorant that they were a naughty generation, and that their malice was bred in them, and that their cogitation would never be changed. For it was a cursed seed from the beginning; neither didst thou for fear of any man give them pardon for those things wherein they sinned. For who shall say, What hast thou done? or who shall withstand thy judgment? or who shall accuse thee for the nations that perish, whom thou hast made? or who shall come to stand against thee, to be revenged for the unrighteous man? For neither is there any God but thou that careth for all, to whom thou mightest show that thy judgment is not unright.*"—Wisd. xii. 10–13.

Joshua.

JUDGES I. AND II.

THE character of Moses' successor, under whose leadership Israel entered the land of promise, is, like that of many soldiers, simple and easily understood. He was strong and of a good courage; a man fit not only for battle, but for tedious campaigning; full of resources, and able to keep up the heart of a whole people by his hopeful bearing. That he should have been able to fill the place vacated by so great a man as Moses, gives us the highest idea of his calibre. That Moses was missed there can be little doubt; yet not Moses himself could have led the people more skilfully and successfully from victory to victory, nor have in the full tide of conquest held them more thoroughly in hand, and settled them

more quietly in the land. It was one of the most difficult of tasks which was entrusted to Joshua. He was to lead the people through a series of the most brilliant and exciting military successes, and then to turn them to the most peaceful pursuits. He was to teach them to shed blood pitilessly, to harden them to such sights as the sacking of towns, and then to enforce laws which in many points were singularly humane. It has been said of the Romans that they conquered like savages and ruled like philosophic statesmen. The same transition had to be accomplished by Israel, and into the strong hand of Joshua was this delicate task committed.

But the work he did needs justification. Many persons have been staggered, and many more have professed to be staggered, by the slaughter of the Canaanites. In order to make room for Israel, tribes which had long inhabited Palestine were exterminated. And in the sacred narrative this ruthless massacre, so far from being condemned as a sin, or

reproved as barbaric cruelty, is attributed to the express command of God: "Thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth, but thou shalt utterly destroy them." No doubt the Canaanites were idolaters; but is this not to propagate religion by the sword? Is not this fierce irruption into Canaan with fire and sword precisely similar to the wave of Mahommedan conquest? Is it any way different from the most pitiless of heathen invasions? How can we justify such an acquisition of territory as this, whilst we are, at least in theory, so scrupulous about adding one acre of unjustly acquired land to our dominions, and cannot let one drop of blood be shed, even in a conquered race, without inquiry?

The key to this difficulty was given in the very first confirmation of the grant made to Abraham. When the land of Canaan was made over to him and his descendants, he was told that they could not at once enter on possession, *because the iniquity of the Amorites was not full.* The transference of territory was thus

from the first viewed and treated as a judicial transaction. God reserves to Himself the right which all sovereigns must and do reserve—the right of removing offenders from the earth, and of confiscating their goods. And the strict and quiet procedure of His justice is rendered conspicuous by the four hundred years of delay to which His own people were subjected. He knew that the Canaanites would not improve; He knew that from the time of Abraham their fate was sealed; and yet He did not anticipate the most deliberate justice, but added a long term to their national life, till they filled up their iniquity to that measure which made extermination their desert and a necessity. Their iniquity was now such that even the surrounding heathen complained of them. The Phœnicians, who belonged to the Canaanitish stock, were well known among ancient nations for enterprise, vigour, dexterity in the arts and in letters, and a certain style of civilisation, which was then peculiar to the East. But they were as well known for the most abominable

idolatries, and the coarsest and cruellest practices. A heathen remarking upon their condition, even in later and purer times, says that avowed Atheism was preferable to so detestable a religion. And if we are to judge of the moral condition of the Canaanites from the hints thrown out in the 18th chapter of Leviticus, it must be admitted that the land could not but "spue out" inhabitants so loathsome and foul.

Essentially, therefore, this was a judicial infliction, and manifestly a just one. And Israel's understanding that they were the executioners of an awful sentence pronounced by God upon the Canaanites, was that which preserved them from any brutalizing effect which the invasion might otherwise have had upon them.* In

* That the Israelites were themselves deeply impressed with this view of the matter, is proved by the remarkable passage in the apocryphal book of *Wisdom* xii. 3-27: "It was thy will to destroy by the hands of our fathers both those old inhabitants of thy holy land, whom thou hatedst for doing most odious works of witchcrafts and wicked sacrifices, and also those merciless murderers of children, and devourers of man's flesh, and the feasts of

other respects this invasion finds a parallel in almost every century of history, and in every part of the world. It is, in point of fact, by conquest that civilisation has spread and is spreading upon earth, and in the career of progress the nations whose iniquities are full—that is to say, which have fallen too low for national redemption—have been swept away by the purer and stronger races. In this, therefore, there is no difference between the conduct of Israel and the conduct of other great nations. The difference consists in this: that while other nations have pushed their conquests for love of gain or glory, or through pride in their leader or mere lust of adventure, Israel entered Canaan as God's servant, again and again warned that they were merely God's sword of justice, and that if they forgot this, and began to think it was their own might that had emptied the

blood, with their priests out of the midst of their idolatrous crew, and the parents that killed with their own hands souls destitute of help: that the land, which thou esteemedst above all other, might receive a worthy colony of God's children."

land for them, they should themselves suffer the like extermination. Between this and many other outwardly similar conquests there was, in short, all the difference which there is between a righteous execution which rejoices the hearts of all good men, and a murder which makes us ashamed of our nature.*

* This is very well put by Maurice (*Patriarchs and Lawgivers*, 261): "The difference between the Jews and other people is precisely this,—All the great nations that we read of have effected extensive and, on the whole, salutary conquests. Their triumphs have been the means of spreading law, government, civilisation, where they would otherwise not have reached. They have swept away feeble, corrupt, sensualized people, who had become animal-worshippers or devil-worshippers, and had lost all sense of their human dignity. But we feel that the nations who have done these works have done them in great part for their own glory, for the increase of their territory, at the instigation and for the gratification of particular leaders. All higher and more blessed results of their success, which it is impossible not to recognise, have been stained and corrupted by the ignoble and selfish tendencies which have mixed with them, and been the motives to them; so that we are continually perplexed with the question, what judgment we shall form of them, or what different causes we can find for such opposite effects. There is *one* nation which is taught from the very first that it is *not* to go out to win any prizes for itself, to bring home the silver or gold, the sheep or the

The Canaanites probably belonged to that race which inherited the curse of Ham,* and which, all the world over, has been pushed out by the two superior races. Their destiny has been singular and melancholy. It has been described in the following terms: "They founded mighty states, but their *cities are a desolation, a dry land, and a wilderness.* They instituted and extended commerce and manufactures, but a *spoil has been made of their riches, and a prey of their merchandise.* They invented letters, and had a written language of their own,

oxen, the men-servants or the women-servants; that it is to be simply the instrument of the righteous Lord against those who were polluting His earth, and making it unfit for human habitation."

* Kuenen (*Religion of Israel*, i. 227, translation) denies this, and maintains that the fact of the similarity between the language of Canaan and that of Israel is sufficient to prove that the two races were closely related. This, however, is only a specimen of the easy way in which Kuenen's school disposes of problems about which scientific men differ. There are other criteria of race besides language, and if the Phenicians were Semites, then, as Farrar says (*Families of Speech*, 135), "they were almost everything which the other Semites were not, and scarcely anything that the other Semites were."

but no page of their literature and no legible record of their deeds remains: their memorials have perished with them. Their power and prosperity were linked to moral qualities of the lowest description and religion of the most degrading character: cruelty and lust were the text of their ritual. No moral considerations guided or restrained their earthly career, which was essentially worldly and materialistic. '*Delenda Carthago*' was a pagan echo of the Divine decree that the Canaanite should be exterminated by their Hebrew invaders." *

In the destruction of the Canaanites, God has written in legible characters this truth, that it is "better the wicked be destroyed a hundred times over, than that they should tempt those who are yet innocent to join their company." Certain it is, that had they not been destroyed, Israel could not have been saved from the universal idolatry. Their salvation would have been the world's destruction. Even as it was, the remnants of them that were

* McCausland's *Builders of Babel*, p. 113.

left led Israel astray, and time after time the salvation of the earth hung on the slender thread of a few pious families who held to the knowledge of the one true God. The taint of idolatry seemed to infect the very air of the defiled land; contamination breathed from the trees of the groves, which were still stained with the blood of human sacrifices, and about which still hung the odour of their intoxicating incense. If God were desirous of letting the whole human race drift away from Him into hopeless darkness, if He wished to stultify all His promises, and for ever sever His creatures from Himself, then no surer plan for effecting these ends could have been adopted than that of sparing the Canaanites. Let us therefore learn the value of purity, and of the knowledge of God. This was not too great a price to pay for it. A greater price than this was yet to be paid. Do we value it so? Who would say, from our careful guarding of purity of character, who could reckon, from our jealous watchfulness against false and weakening views of God, that

we held in such high esteem what has thus been purchased for us? Not even facts will teach us. Not even such a destruction as this will convince us that God values holiness and godliness in men, and *at any price* will have these. One would suppose that after such a lesson the Israelites would have considered themselves precious in God's sight, and would have done what they could to carry out His purpose of preserving them uncorrupted. And one would suppose that when we have been taught by the sacrifice of Christ the value God sets upon holiness in us, we should be found living in fear of contagion from the evil of the world, and counting ourselves of some value. But is it so? Have we some disinfectant in our persons which makes it safe for us to expose ourselves to sinful example which would have been death to Israel? Have we, in making up our minds as to our intercourse with the world, brought this element into consideration—that our purity is a thing of exceeding value in God's sight, for which He has made great sacrifices?

There are Gibeonitish alliances with the world which we must retain: there are connections formed in ignorance of their real nature, and which we cannot now break, and there are connections of an earthly kind which we cannot dispense with; but even these a highly spiritual mind submits to reluctantly: they hew wood and draw water for him: he will keep the world his servant, and not get entangled in such alliance with it as really makes it his master.

The new leader of Israel received a name, which, by identifying his leadership with God's, gave constant promise of victory. Originally called Hoshea, or Salvation, this name was changed, when he led the spies, to Jehoshua, or The Lord is salvation. And it has never ceased to seem significant to the Christian that this name of Joshua should have been that by which our Lord was called. In its Greek form, "Jesus," it was given to Him because he was to save His people from their sins. By His distinctive name among men he was linked to Joshua, and in the salvation He accomplishes

for His people we are therefore led to expect the same leading characteristics as distinguished the salvation of Israel by Joshua.

We are, in the first place, reminded by this parallel that the help afforded to us in Christ is God's help, and this in a fuller sense than was true in Israel's case. For though the angel of the Lord appeared to Joshua, as the gods of other nations were fabled to descend at the hour of need into the fight and scare the enemy, yet the angel of the Lord was one person and Joshua another. But in the person of Christ Jesus these two are one — the human Leader and divine Saviour. In Him the name can receive its most literal rendering, and when we speak of Jesus we name "The Lord our Salvation." In Him we are introduced to God, and meet Him in the form of a Saviour. In order to be saved, we have not to fight against God; we have not to change His mind, or escape from Him; He is already on our side, fighting for us. It is as our Saviour He has revealed Himself in the Son; and He being

our Saviour, there is hope for us whatever we are. He is wise, and does not undertake the salvation of those who are past redemption. He is almighty, and does not break down in the execution of His purposes. He is sovereign, and none can dispute His right to save us. "It is God that justifieth; who is he that condemneth?" "Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed over from my God?"—as if such a contingency as that were possible.

Again, we are reminded by this parallel, that as in the conquest of the land by Joshua, so in our salvation, is there a somewhat perplexing mixture of miracle and hard fighting. Sometimes the rivers that flow deep before us, and seem even to overflow their banks and to become more impassable to us than to others, open at our approach, and we pass over dryshod. At other times we are allowed to fall into ambuscades, or we are entangled among the scythe-chariots that sweep over the field and leave us crippled,

if not slain outright. And just as the Israelites, when they found the Jordan open before them and the walls of Jericho fall down, supposed that the conquest of the land was to be completed without their drawing their swords, and were in consequence defeated before Ai, so are the great mass of those who enter the Christian life presuming that God will give them the land of uprightness, purity of heart, and holiness of life, with scarcely an effort on their part. And therefore, though there was miracle on the side of Israel, yet *this* rule was distinctly laid down as the rule by which the territory was allotted to the tribes, that each was to have what each could take, and hold against the enemy. We find recorded the gallant petition of Caleb, now an old man, but dauntless as when he fought against Amalek forty years before,— how he said to Joshua, "The Lord hath kept me alive, as he said, these forty and five years; . . . and now, lo, I am this day fourscore and five years old. As yet I am as strong this day as I was in the day

that Moses sent me to spy out the land: as my strength was then, even so is my strength now, for war, both to go out, and to come in. Now therefore give me this mountain" (observe the reason); "for thou heardest in that day how the Anakims were there, and that the cities were great and fenced: if so be the Lord will be with me, then I shall be able to drive them out." And Joshua blessed him, and gave him the inheritance he was thus prepared to fight for.

This is the law of our acquisitions also. What becomes really ours is what we fight for inch by inch, killing as we go; slaughtering the obstinate foe on his own soil, so that the property be left to us uncontested. God's grant is useless to us, quite useless, if we will not draw the sword and conquer it, if we will not wield the axe and clear it. These two united form the strongest of titles, God's grant and our own conquest. What a man wins by his own faith, fortitude, and persistence, by his own nerve, vigour, and hardihood; fighting as a soldier commissioned by God to do battle

against evil—*that*, and nothing else, he has as his very own. No other person can make a man pure; he must, with God's grace, make himself pure. No other person can harden your soul against sin, no other person can go through the thousand efforts and resistances to sin you must make if ever you are to be righteous. Knowledge cannot be acquired for you by the reading of another person: you cannot grow strong by the exercise which a friend takes; so neither can you acquire holiness except by your own steady application to the pursuit of holiness and gradual attainment therein. The purity and ripeness of character which your own heart approves and thirsts for, and which your own will bends itself to attain, and your own self-denial and painful endurance enable you to attain, that remains your acquisition and possession for ever.

A second law which followed upon this as a consequence, was that the aboriginal inhabitants whom the Israelites were too careless or too cowardly to subdue, were used by

God as their scourges, and left as thorns in their sides. God announced the important principle, that He will not drive out what we do not drive out. "I will not drive them out from before you, but they shall be as thorns in your sides" (Numbers xxxiii. 55, and Joshua xxiii. 13). And so it came to pass that there were spotted all over the land, in every place of vantage, strong bands of marauding foes, that swept time after time over the land like locusts, and left no green thing behind them. The Israelites had not pushed their conquest back into the fortresses and fastnesses of the hills, and in these there were continually growing up and training fresh troops of young warriors; so that for generations the people sowed their grain heartlessly, knowing that they were but preparing nourishment for their foes; and they became craven-hearted, slinking along the by-paths, and not daring to claim their own. This came of their contentedness to league with those whom God had told them to destroy.

And every one can trace in his own life how one unconquered sin becomes a thorn in the side. For ours also is commonly but a half-completed conquest. We have not made war upon our sin in its fastnesses and breeding-places, in the lurking-places of thought and of our habitual tone. We did not believe that happy was he who dashed the little ones against the stones; we did not grapple and put an end to the young things that grow up to be strong and subduing sins. We were not remorseless, did not rouse ourselves to take stern and extreme measures. But it is not enough to let sin alone, so long as it does not violently molest us. If we know our own hearts at all, we know that sin may be lodging in them, and gathering strength, without making incursions that visibly devastate the life. And so it has come true in our experience that God has not driven out what we would not rouse ourselves to drive out, and our sin has become a thorn in our side. Again and again that thing we would not

slay makes us cry out before God that life is not worth having if it is to be life with this sin. We may learn to wear the thorn under our garment, and go about smiling, as if there were not terrible havoc being made of our peace with God; we may wear it as the ascetic wears his spiked girdle under his frock; but it is there, reminding us, by pain and misery and weakness, of our slackness in cleansing our life. One sin thus excepted and overlooked, cleaves to us and makes itself felt in all our life: not a day passes but something occurs to give it occasion; it is a thorn in our flesh,* carried with us into all companies, cleaving to us at all times; our one inseparable; exasperating, saddening, heart-breaking in its pertinacity. Like a fierce and cruel foe, it has spoiled or swept off our best harvests. As often as we have continued in

* May it not reasonably be supposed that Paul speaks of his "thorn in the flesh" with a reference to the Old Testament phraseology in which his mind was so steeped, and that his thorn was some sin he had been too long in attending to, or some weakness resulting from such sin?

godly effort and earnest prayer for a time, and seem to be about to bear some fruit and be fit for some service, the old sin comes in to cheat us of the fruit of long-continued exertion, and puts us back to the very same point in the spiritual life. The whole weary work has to be begun afresh: as a land exposed to perpetual invasion, our life is left fruitless, and we have to go through the same weary and now hopeless routine of ploughing and sowing. Days of dull gnawing remorse and despondency, shame at verifying the unbelief of the worldly in a godly life, heartlessness in the whole work of cleansing our souls from sin, perplexity about the way in which God means to save us, and distrust of Him, — these are the piercing pains which these thorns in our sides produce.

> Oh, the regret, the struggle, and the failing!
> Oh, the days desolate and useless years!
> Vows in the night so fierce and unavailing!
> Stings of my shame and passion of my tears!

Our whole life remains, not like a peaceful, God-protected land, but like a wild dis-

tracted country, in which there may be an occasional deed of valour, but which for the most part moans with oppression.

But, finally, we see in this conquest to which Israel was led by Joshua in what sense, and to what extent, we should look for present victory over sin. Joshua did not deal only in promises. He said, There are your foes, let us slay them. He would have been hooted out of his command had he not given actual victory. Promises would have been counted mere evasions. And no one who is in earnest about sin will be put off with mere expectations of deliverance. Sin is as much sin now as ever it can be in the future. If it is wrong to sin in the world to come it is wrong to sin now. Sin, if hateful to God, must be as hateful now as ever it can be. If God is in earnest about delivering me from sin, He will deliver me now; and if I am in earnest about being delivered, no expectation of future deliverance can compensate for the misery of present bondage. The Saviour I need is one who can help me to-day, one who

counts my present enemies His enemies, and who can communicate to me such real strength as shall make the difference between my being defeated and my conquering them. If He merely promises to take me out from among my foes, if He merely says I shall be rid of them when I die, is that to be called victory? Certainly not; and it is not such victory Christ offers. But many perhaps may say, I would it were so; that Christ gave present victory, that His saving from sin meant my being saved from those sins I am in bondage to, those only sins it concerns me to be saved from. I would it were so. This were a salvation to be prized, by which I myself could now become a better, holier, more useful man. But I have sought such salvation long; I may not be much in earnest about anything, but I have spent more earnestness in seeking such salvation than in any other pursuit; and I cannot see that I have found it. Theoretically, nothing seems grander and more satisfactory than this salvation by Christ. Practically, it fails me at every point.

It is useless to give the lie to experience; and it were untrue to say that yours is a singular case, or that you ought to expect greater things. For when conquest of present sins is promised, you are not to expect immediate victory. You will not have any victory if you do not engage in immediate warfare. But read the history of Israel, and what do you find? That they held their land at immense cost of life and treasure; that no bloodier battles are on record than those in which they had to engage with their old foes. They were successful, they did hold their land, but never found it much easier than at the first. So when you fall into sin that makes you doubt whether Christ is a present Saviour, there is really nothing else to say than this: You must win back again the ground you have lost. Of course it is weary work, heart-breaking, humbling, tormenting work, — a trial to faith so dreadful that many a soul has broken down under it; yet what is to be done? Are you to yield to sin? are you to live on contentedly

with that in you which you know is working death? are you to disbelieve Jesus Christ and live at a distance from God, unable to bring your state of heart into the light of His countenance? Rather than this, will you not endure all things, making each relapse into sin the occasion of doing something more to guard against its recurrence, and of praying to God more and not less earnestly? You know that you *must* make way if you do so. Your sins may be so strongly rooted in your nature that you see before you a lifetime of struggle; but so is it with many. Even when you lie stiff and unconscious on the field of battle, you may be of the winning party. As he who died in the moment of victory, his eye already dim so that he could not see whether it was the ranks of friend or foe that were breaking, so do most Christians die, sword in hand, not having had much time to erect trophies and sing hymns of victory, and see all the fruit of their warfare, but not the less certainly having obtained eternal victory over the sins they knew and fought against in this present life.

II.

GIDEON.

"*And the Lord looked upon him, and said, Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?*"—Judges vi. 14.

"*Thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian.*"—Isa. ix. 4; *comp.* Isa. x. 26.

Gideon.

JUDGES VI. VII. VIII.

THE writer of the Book of Judges has preserved scarcely any information regarding the life of Gideon, except that which belongs to one very brief period of it—the period of a few days during which he gathered an army, attacked the Midianites, and drove them out of the land. And he seems to have selected from this period mainly those incidents which illustrate the various attitudes men take up towards the work of God.

The first figure which the historian sets before us is that of Gideon himself. He draws aside the curtain, and shows us a man in the flower of life, dressed as an agricultural labourer, busily occupied with his flail, threshing out his wheat; not in the usual place—not in the field

where it had grown—but in the wine-press, for fear of the Midianites discovering him at work and robbing him of his harvest. As you look at the man's face you see that his thoughts are not in his work: there is something more than the energy required for his task causing him to compress his lips and knit his brow. The vehemence of his strokes suggests that he is thinking of these invaders that swarm on the plain below, and wishing he only had them under his flail, as well as the bounding corn.* As we watch him at his work a stranger approaches, pauses, and gives him the usual greeting, "The Lord be with thee," adding, with apparently a reference to his vehement strokes and his thoughts about the Midianites, "thou mighty man of valour;" but Gideon is in no mood to hear with patience even the ordinary courtesies of life. As you have sometimes unwittingly fired a person's indignation

* This first appearance of Gideon is in striking accordance with his name, which means "one who hews down or breaks," like Martel or Maccabæus.

by the most ordinary remarks, or as you yourself may have been in such a mood as made the most ordinary remark or kindly wish seem a mockery to you, and as you have impatiently dashed aside the usual conventional speeches men make, because there was some bitter thing making you earnest and exasperating you, so Gideon could not listen with patience even to this salutation, but broke out, "If the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us?" Gideon was not going to accept a mere religious phrase instead of a divine fact: he was not a man that could comfortably blind himself with a common-place of religious talk, and cease to look for any practical results of religious truth. He knew it was all nonsense talking about God's presence, if the work of God could not be measured by any practical test. He had too profound a conviction of God's power to believe He could be present without interfering to suppress unrighteousness. It provoked him, therefore, to hear men using the common talk about God's presence while the Midianites were

swarming over God's land, and almost within earshot. This it was which was ever in his thoughts: "If the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us? Am I to believe that Jehovah, who wrought miracles for our fathers, has become like the mere gods of wood and stone, blind and helpless?"

Even in these first words of Gideon, then, we find the key to his character. He was a man who felt deeply the degradation of his people. He could not enjoy his own harvest while the Midianites were robbing all around; he had the patriot's wide sympathy. He was a man, also, of the strongest common sense, accustomed to look through words to things, and to look the facts of life fair in the face. And, above all, he was a man of abundant personal valour, but yet unwilling to move a step until he was sure God was with him; bold to risk anything, once he was convinced God would stand by him, but fearful to hazard a single life without this conviction. This was brought out, you will remember, by the singular test which

Gideon audaciously proposed to God, laying out a fleece, and asking God to show His presence and His power by causing the fleece to be soaked with dew while the ground was dry, and dry when the ground was wet. This he did, not from cowardice, but because it was not his nature to risk anything; he was a thoughtful man, who had difficulties other men had not.

But we cannot fully understand Gideon's attitude towards the work of God, without taking into account the fact that the first thing he was commanded to do was to hew down the altar of Baal which had been erected in his father's grounds. No doubt he was expecting to be summoned to draw the sword against Midian; instead of that, he must begin by wielding the axe against the idolatry of his own household.* This was a rebuke to

* It seems mere perversity which leads Ewald to affirm in his absolute way: "Everything leads to the conclusion that not until after his victories over the foes without, did he acquire power to subdue also those within" (vol. ii. p. 381). Surely every thorough reformation, individual or social, proceeds in the reverse order, from within outwards.

Gideon. Gideon, filled with a sense of his people's wrongs, had been impatient that God did not manifest Himself in some striking deliverance; but how could God come to a people who were unprepared to receive Him? His path was choked with the people's idolatry. Gideon was waiting for God to work, and beginning to speak somewhat bitterly of God's indifference, whereas the delay was altogether caused by Gideon's own household. God was waiting for him to work. God could not come among them while they were all turned away from Him to Baal. No sooner had Gideon hewed down the altar of Baal than he received his commission against Midian.*

You will observe, then, Gideon's precise attitude: you will observe that he was right in refusing to believe God was present if things

* The clever defence of Gideon by his father Joash (vi. 31), full as it is of the peculiarly Israelitish satire, reminds one of the saying of Tiberius, in reference to the charge brought against Falanius of having put up to auction a statue of Augustus: "Deorum injurias Diis curae," Let the gods avenge their own indignities. (Tac. *Ann.* i. 73.)

went on just as if He were not present, but he was wrong in not seeing what it was that prevented God from being present. He was right in arguing, What God was, He is; why then does He not do for us what He did for our fathers? He was right in debating with himself, and asking: Is this what it means to be God's people? What is the use of living at this price? But he was wrong in thinking that the fault lay with God, and not with himself; wrong in not seeing his very obvious duty, which, until he performed, God could not be expected to work for Israel. Just so we are right in refusing to accept a religion which makes no practical difference upon us; right in impatiently throwing aside the mere traditional assurances whereby men soothe sinners and promise them deliverance; right in looking straight at the facts of our own experience, and testing religion by its power on ourselves; but we often add to this the mistake of Gideon, and fall out with God for not interfering more powerfully in our behalf, when it is we our-

selves who are preventing Him from so interfering. You wait for God to do something, while He is waiting for you. If you are not able to use God's strength, if you might as well be heathen for all the moral help you get from God, then depend upon it there is something wrong in your conduct towards God, some plain duty you are neglecting.

We should all of us be hoping, like Gideon, to work some deliverance in the earth before we leave it. We should all of us be impatient that this earth is so little like the field of the operation of the holy, good God. There is no lack of evil that needs abolishing, of good that needs doing, and it is to accomplish this we are called by Christ. And, probably, all of us are desirous of accomplishing something; there is some good work that we see needs to be done, and we should like to do it. It is quite possible to make this life a life worth living, quite possible to effect some real good in the world. Life need not be all a failure, and a pretence, and a vanity. And the

secret of success now is just what it was in Gideon's day, that God be with us. And if God be not with us, if we are not succeeding in the work we have undertaken, if we are not doing any good, if we cannot see that God helps us at all, then certainly there is something in our life hindering God from coming to us with power. We need not wonder we are not receiving God's blessing in work undertaken for others, if our own lives are stained with glaring sins. We need not wonder we are getting little of God's help in any way, if we are allowing some plain and obvious duty to stand undone.

2. Gideon's attitude, then, towards God's work, though not satisfactory, was due not so much to a flaw in his spirit as to a mental blindness to duty. This could be, and was, easily amended. But the narrator goes on to show that there are other attitudes which men assume, and which unfit them for doing anything for God in the world. When Gideon had gathered 32,000 volunteers to attack

Midian, God saw how much untrustworthy material existed in this army. Two devices were used to weed it of its elements of weakness, to reject from it all whom God counted unfit to fight His battles. The first was the usual and wise proclamation, issued as soon as they came in sight of the enemy, that whosoever was faint-hearted should leave the ranks and quit the field, that their fear might not create a panic as soon as the battle began.* No fewer than two-thirds of the whole army took advantage of this proclamation—a striking evidence of the different estimate men make of danger and hard work at a distance and at hand. The large numbers of the Christian army are similarly made up—are made up by those who are bold in intention, brave at home but cowards in the field; they answer, or seem to answer, God's summons at first, but take the earliest opportunity of backing out of their engagements.

Many persons, when you speak to them of

* Deut. xx. 8.

this and that useful undertaking, seem quite to enjoy the prospect of engaging in it, promise their services, and actually appear at the rendezvous; but the actual sight of the destitution, the disease, the ignorance, the incivility, the lying and fraudulent selfishness, with which they must cope, quite frightens them, and they avail themselves of the first plausible opening to escape. And it is better they should do so, for by remaining, their faintheartedness would be contagious, and unnerve their comrades. Every one knows how easy it is to work alongside of a cheery, bright, hopeful spirit; how difficult to bear up against the continual complaint, and fear, and wretchedness of the cowardly. Such, therefore, God rejects from His army.

3. But the 10,000 men who were left after this elimination of the cowards were still too many to defeat the 135,000 Midianites. There might be a large number remaining in the ranks merely from shame, though they had no great heart for the business. There might be some

cold-blooded men who were no cowards, but who were just as little eager patriots. There might be some who had sufficient courage to enter the battle, without sufficient endurance to fight it out. Of all these the army must be thinned. But obviously this requires a much more delicate process than the first reduction. Accordingly the very singular and memorable device which we have now read of was adopted. The men were led down to the water, and all those who lay down to drink, putting their mouths to the water, were rejected; while all those who merely stooped and scooped up water in their hands were selected. These latter were the true soldiers—men who could not make a leisurely business of drinking while the enemy was in sight; but who, if thirsty, could at the most snatch a mouthful of water as they passed the stream. The simple device showed a real difference of temperament in the men, and set them off into two well-defined classes; the men who were so eager for the fight, and so full of the presence of the enemy,

that they could not have patience even to settle themselves to slake their thirst; and the men who were not sorry for any little delay in meeting the enemy, and who desired, if they were to fight, at least to be comfortable themselves.

The former class alone, then, is judged by God to be in a right attitude towards His work. They who lap like dogs are retained, in the last analysis of God's army, as the efficient force that is to do His work. You have seen a dog running along the bank of a water, or in the shallow of a stream, or in a ditch, and, without stopping, snatching mouthfuls or tonguefuls of water, too intent on his pursuit to take a leisurely drink, never even while slaking his thirst turning aside or pausing from the chase. So the man who is eager to destroy the common enemy, the man who is carried away with enthusiasm in a good cause, the man whose blood is roused by God's call, will rarely pay enough attention to his own health or business, or to any

of those objects men count most necessary. The common rank and file of Christians are ready enough to waste time over them, are not sorry for excuse for lingering and hanging back from duty, where one may get more blows than comforts. As the majority of these soldiers sought out dry and soft places for their knees, took off their helmets, and slackened their belts before they lay down to drink, so the majority even of good Christian people not only take the necessary water, not only engage in the necessary duties, but do so in such a deliberate, leisurely manner, as to show that we have no higher aim for which we are trying to save time, and which draws us eagerly on through all our occupations. We *have* to eat and drink: yes, but we need not prolong our meals and linger over them. We *must* engage in the business of this life — no doubt; at the same time it is amusing to stand by and observe what men count the necessities of business — necessities which would be reduced to a very small proportion if men became

enamoured of any great aim or pursuit, either for this world or that which is to come. We do not say that men who are so steeped in their own worldly objects shall not have even a narrow entrance into God's kingdom. But what this narrative assures us of is, that such are not the men whom God will use for His work. These 10,000 who were brought to the water were all fair soldiers—not cowards, not altogether ignorant nor indifferent to the emergency, to the need of striking a blow for God and His people — but only 300 of them had that eagerness for the work that kept them from paying undue regard to other things. And so, bring a number of men who are all alike good, sound-hearted Christians, bring them into the ordinary circumstances that are testing us day by day, and what do you find? That only a very small proportion count their own ends merely things by the way, and hurry as fast as possible past them. These men did not know Gideon's purpose in leading them to the water: so it may be, and it is, the most

ordinary matter that is showing whether we are dogs that lap, whether we are fitted for God's service by a sense of the urgency of the case and a desire to do good so genuine as to carry us past our own selfish aims and comforts, and even necessities.

4. Yet a fourth attitude which men take up towards the work of God in the world is depicted by the historian here. When Midian was in full flight before the gallant 300, Gideon sent a messenger to the tribe of Ephraim to seize the fords of Jordan, so as to cut off the common foe, and prevent even a remnant from escaping. Ephraim did so; but on returning from this service called Gideon to task for not inviting them to join him earlier: "Why hast thou served us thus, that thou calledst us not when thou wentest to fight with the Midianites?" Ephraim's attitude is not quite easy to determine. They may have been in either of two states of mind—either really high-spirited and vexed that they had not been invited to help in overthrowing the Midianites,

or only wishing now that they had had a share in this glory, and wishing to make it appear that they would have gladly joined Gideon; although possibly had they been asked to do so when the event was still uncertain they might have been more backward. Certainly there are both these classes still—persons who feel really hurt if they are not asked to help in every good work, who are offended if they are not asked for subscriptions, and if they are not counted on for assistance in any undertaking that calls for wisdom, perseverance, and grace. These are the most useful men in the Christian Church and in the world, and we are willing to suppose that Ephraim was of this spirit. But there are others who, when a good work is in its infancy, and has not got over its first difficulties, make no movement to assist it; but no sooner does it begin to grow and be talked of and become popular, than they come forward and loudly complain that they were never asked to join, though very probably they have been throughout aware that such a work was going

on, and that it needed all the help it could get. You will have noticed that such persons complain all the more loudly now because their conscience accuses them of lukewarmness before, and because they would fain persuade themselves and others that they have been waiting anxiously to be invited to join this good work.

In passing, we may notice the admirable self-command and tact displayed in Gideon's answer to Ephraim. He is flushed with victory when Ephraim ventures to chide him thus, he has at his back his three hundred invincibles, he knows himself God's chosen chief: what would most men have done if sharply reprimanded in such circumstances? Probably not made the exquisitely skilful answer of this most sagacious of commanders: "What have I done now in comparison of you? Is not the *gleaning* of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abi-ezer?" My household has no doubt cut the first-fruits, but what is our harvest in comparison with these rich clusters, the

heads of Oreb and Zeeb, the princes of Midian, which you have gleaned?" Then their anger was abated toward him, when he had said that.

So let us answer any who may find fault with our way of managing God's work: let us answer in good temper and self-command; let us give those who find fault their due, and point them to the rich gleanings that remain to be gathered; let us, like Gideon, beware of allowing some good work we are engaged in to become the occasion of introducing wrangling, envy, and unseemly discord among God's people, who ought to be bound together against the common foe.

5. A fifth and last attitude which men frequently assume towards God's work is represented in the men of Succoth and Penuel. These two towns, when Gideon led his troops, now spent with hunger and weariness, past them, refused to give them even a little bread; and not only so, but when Gideon reminded them that it was no private enterprise he was engaged in, but that he was pursuing the host

of Midian, the townsmen laughed at him, and asked him if Zebah and Zalmunna were already in his hands, that they should reward him with bread for his army. There can be no doubt at all about the spirit of these men. Gideon had no doubt about it, and vowed that when he returned from the pursuit he would teach the men of Succoth, and slay the men of Penuel; which vow he kept. He acted here very differently from his manner with Ephraim. These men were blind to the glory of the common cause—selfish, poor-spirited creatures, that shut themselves up in their fenced cities, and were satisfied to let God's soldiers starve, and God's work come to an end for want of support, so long only as they had bread enough to satisfy their own hunger. This was a state of mind not to be corrected by a mere civil speech or explanation. Gideon taught them, not by expostulation, but by the sword and with the briers of the wilderness.

Can we say that there are none now who merit the same punishment? none who resist

every appeal to assist those who are faint by pursuing God's work? There are still men who have no eye for spiritual importance, but measure all things by their outward appearance and by their relation to their own comfort; men who fortify themselves in their ungenerous selfishness by asking, as these men of Succoth did, "What have you made of this pursuit in which you want us to assist you? what great good have you done, that we should help you? Are *Z*ebah and *Z*almunna already in your hands, that we should acknowledge you as useful men, and give you what you ask to help you on in your pursuit?" For such persons, who despise the day of small things, who cannot recognise God if He takes on Him the form of a little child, nor His Church when it exists as a grain of mustard seed, there remains the doom of seeing the whole work of God in the world finished without their aid, and of hearing the voice of God Himself in rebuke, "Behold, ye despisers, and wonder and perish!"

In closing, let us remark the incident which

in some respects is the most interesting in Gideon's career. It is, indeed, not directly in that line of thought we have endeavoured to follow, but it bears its own very useful lesson. When Gideon was lying undaunted with his three hundred men, watching an opportunity to attack, God gave him an encouraging sign, by which he might be at once rewarded for, and confirmed in, his courageous trust in God. Such encouragement God frequently gives to those who undertake difficult work through a sense of duty, and in faith. Gideon was directed to go down and reconnoitre the Midianite camp, and on doing so he heard the dream which we have read.* In this dream the imagination of the Midianite had represented the host of these dwellers in tents as a large tent, securely pegged, its cords tight, and apparently as safe as any house; while the little band of half-starved Israelites appeared to him like a thin barley-cake.† But

* Judges vii. 13.

† "Barley bread is only eaten by the poor and the unfortunate. . . . And if the Midianites were accustomed

this light and thin cake was blown along by the wind of God, and came rolling and bounding on till it struck the tent and overthrew it. His companion no sooner heard the dream than his own fear interpreted it, "This is the sword of Gideon." It did not require so sagacious a scout as Gideon to gather from this that already there was the beginning of a panic in the Midianite host.

But what is chiefly to be observed is, that probably Gideon never saw his own relation to God so distinctly as when it was thus pourtrayed by the Midianite. Gideon felt that he was but the thin, weak, limp cake; that there was a ludicrous disproportion between the means at his command and the work he was to accomplish. But then, behind him was the unseen but mighty wind of God's Spirit, that swept him on irresistibly and made him

in their extemporaneous songs to call Gideon and his band *eaters of barley-bread*, as their successors, those haughty Bedawin, often do, to ridicule their enemies, the application would be all the more natural."—Thomson's *Land and Book*, 449.

invincible. This was Gideon's encouragement, and this must be the encouragement of each of us in all duty. That man must have low aims indeed who never finds himself confronted by duty that he feels to be impossible; who does not feel again and again that the conquest of sin in himself is impossible; who is not again and again perplexed by the difficult circumstances he is silently swept into; who does not feel helpless before the profound, rooted misery, the masses of distress and crime in the world. What can one do? We can do nothing of ourselves: God does not expect that we should. But there is nothing we may not do, if the almighty inspiration of God takes us and carries us forward as its instrument. But how, you will say, are we to secure that inspiration? how are we to get into the current of God's Spirit, so as to be carried along by it? How, we may ask in reply, do sailors get to their destination? They cannot themselves drag their ship along—they are helpless in this respect; neither can they raise winds for them-

selves. They cannot supply their own motive power, and yet they can do all that is necessary. They know where and when certain winds blow, and getting into the current of these, they guide their vessel to its port. You also know the directions in which God's Spirit blows; you know the objects towards which God is willing to help you; you know what God Himself aims at and wishes done; and though you cannot reach those objects by your own strength, yet if you set your face towards them, if you keep your soul in their direction, if you make them your real aim, God's Spirit cannot miss you—you will be caught and carried along in His powerful inspiration.

No doubt you may often feel spent and exhausted, like Gideon's men. Indeed, the words in which he reported the condition of his troops have become one of the favourite mottoes of the Christian life, "Faint, yet pursuing." The motive, the impelling power seems to have died down, and to have left you becalmed. The good works you have engaged in become utterly

distasteful. The high tone you have been endeavouring to maintain in your spirits, you sink from with weariness and loathing. You ask, Why am I to be always fighting other people's battles? "putting right the numberless things wrong among them, supplying their deficiencies and necessities, doing for them what they ought to do for themselves, and apparently little good resulting after all?" It is so weary to go through, day after day, the same resolutions, the same efforts, the same failures, the same repentances. Faint we all of us must often be who are striving with any earnestness against sin, and who are concerned for the numberless varieties of distress exhibited by our fellow-men. Faintness is the lot of all who undertake laborious and difficult tasks. But while we experience the one sensation of Gideon's men, let us endeavour to imitate them in the other part of their experience. Faint, let us still be pursuing; keeping the enemy in sight; not yielding to our natural love of ease, nor wearying of the perpetual labour; but re-

membering our *duty*, that these wearisome conflicts and efforts ought to be gone through, and must be gone through, if we are to be and do what we ought; remembering how our Lord endured the contradiction of sinners, and resisted unto blood, striving against sin; and remembering the promises of God, which assure us that in due time we shall *reap*, if we *faint* not—that every effort, every sincere renewal of our labour, is seed sown, which may for the time seem to have gone for nothing, but which is certainly not lost, but only hidden, to spring up and reward us with the only harvest worthy of a human life.

III.

JOTHAM'S FABLE.

"*The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them; and they said unto the olive tree, Reign thou over us. But the olive tree said unto them, Should I leave my fatness, wherewith by me they honour God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? And the trees said to the fig tree, Come thou, and reign over us. But the fig tree said unto them, Should I forsake my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over the trees? Then said the trees unto the vine, Come thou and reign over us. And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? Then said all the trees unto the bramble, Come thou, and reign over us. And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow; and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon.*"—Judges ix. 8–15.

Jotham's Fable.

WE are frequently pointed to ancient Rome for examples of the most successful attempts to meet special political emergencies, and for the wisest and strongest forms of rule. And in Rome there was an office very similar to that of the Israelitish judge. In times when the ordinary government seemed insufficient, from the unwieldiness of official movements or from the incapacity of those in office, to meet the special emergency, it was customary to devolve the whole executive power upon a single man, who for a certain time or till a certain task was accomplished became absolute Dictator* — his

* Aristotle (*Politics* III. xiv. 9) observes that in ancient Greece there were "elective tyrannies," to which individuals were appointed "for some definite time named, or for some specified objects."

judgment and will dictating without appeal what was to be done. The advantages of having a government so elastic as to be able to carry on the yearly routine of political business and to face an emergency with all the concentrated vigour of a single will and a single arm, are obvious. It was a happy combination of the presumed fairness and wisdom of a republic and the rapidity of movement of an absolute monarchy. The danger lay in the temptation there always was to make the exceptional and occasional office of judge a permanent one. It was natural that when the people saw that for every great movement a leader was required, and that no council or assembly could act so vigorously as one man, they should begin to wish that their affairs should be permanently in the hands of one man—a very great mistake, but a mistake into which both the Romans and the Israelites fell after the lapse of two or three hundred years. It is to the credit of Gideon that he saw this danger, and warned the Israelites against it. After his own successes the

people came to him and pressed him to accept a permanent headship over them, and from a judge to become a king, saying "Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also." Gideon said unto them, "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you."

In these words of Gideon we see to the very heart of the history of this period. The significance of the long interval of three hundred years between Moses and Samuel is exhibited in the attitude Gideon assumes towards the request of the people that he should become their king. During these years Israel was finding that the theocracy, however good in itself, was not in their case working out any good result. It has always been found a difficult thing to keep a nation together and in such a healthy state as alike to resist foreign invasion and internal decay. And it has been too little considered that forms of government which are good for one community are not good for others in different circumstances. Get a

people of faith and simplicity enough to live up to it, and theocracy is the best government. It needs no proof that if it is possible for a nation to have and to obey God as their king, the prosperity of that people is secured in the highest degree. But unfortunately magistrates and officials who are amenable only to an unseen ruler become lax and corruptible. A population which is not held together by a firm centralization forgets the common interests in what is local or special. The popular conscience requires the aid of outward and awe-inspiring *appearances* of law and judgment to quicken it to obedience. Perhaps no nation for any long period ever had so much of the Spirit of God, so much remembrance of the Unseen, so much fidelity to the common cause, so much desire to pursue righteousness, as to fit it to live under a theocracy. Certainly Israel did not rise to the occasion. Symptoms of disunion and selfishness began to appear among the tribes. The entire government of the country seems to have been disorganised and feeble. Extraordinary

abuses, both in religious and civil matters, made their appearance. And this growing corruption, which threatened the nation with extinction, was in after times, if not then, referred chiefly to their want of a visible, earthly monarch. "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes." And here, in Gideon's kinglike* presence, this smouldering consciousness that the theocracy was too ethereal, too spiritual for them, found vent for the first time in the request that he would become their visible king. But just in proportion as he was fit to be their king, did he also shrink from the office. It was as God's servant he had felt courage and power to defeat Midian, and he dared not already deny his and Israel's Sovereign.

And it is this which characterises the whole period of the judges. It was the period during which the theocracy was tried. Gradually it became more and more evident that Israel

* Judges viii. 18.

could not continue to exist without an earthly governor. The very efficiency of these temporary and occasional rulers made the people long for a regular and hereditary monarchy. The better men in the nation always resisted this craving, and yet evidently the current of popular opinion and action was strongly setting towards it.* It was shown in the days of Moses and Samuel what the theocracy might be in the hands of wise and faithful men. And it was owing to the self-abnegation and fidelity of the judges, first and last, that the future kings of Israel were taught how to reconcile their own government with the theocracy—a lesson certainly which few of them made use of.

But what the father thus nobly declined,

*"As it became evident that the nation could not permanently dispense with an earthly governor, it was forced to consent, if it would not utterly perish, to rally round some powerful human leader, and to obey, next to Jahveh, a king chosen from among themselves."—Ewald, *Hist. of Israel*, ii. 359. But Ewald, in his profound and suggestive remarks on this period, ascribes its anarchy and confusion too directly to the theocracy itself, and not to the people's unfitness.

became the object of the son's ambition. Abimelech, who inherited his father's daring energy without his magnanimity, resolved to avail himself of this desire on the part of the people to have a king. His mother was a woman of Shechem, and to that city, therefore, where his influence was naturally greatest, he repaired. Shechem being an important town in the most prominent and ambitious tribe, the tribe of Ephraim, Abimelech saw that could he succeed in being nominated king of Shechem he might very easily come to be king of Israel. He persuaded his mother's house to advocate his cause, and in order to insure his seat on the throne, he adopted the cruel and unnatural device commonly resorted to in the East, of slaughtering or otherwise disposing of all other possible rivals and claimants to the throne. Greater contrast could not well be than between Gideon and Abimelech: the father declining even those honours to which his merits entitled him, the son thirsting for honours to which he had no claim; the father having at heart solely

the good of his country and people, the son intensely self-seeking and ambitious. The youngest son of Gideon, Jotham, seems to have inherited the hereditary wit of the family, so conspicuous in Gideon and his father—a wit which first enabled Jotham to escape the sanguinary end of his brothers, and then to lash with biting satire the foolish Shechemites and their new king. He must also have inherited the daring and cool courage of his father, a courage which enabled him to collect his thoughts in the midst of imminent danger, and to utter them in circumstances which would have caused the voice of most men to tremble. It is to the fable into which Jotham compressed his views of the transaction that our attention is now to be directed.*

The fable requires little explanation. It was

* "It is easy to comprehend how Jotham could stand above Shechem, and deliver his allegory in the hearing of the people, and then 'run away' before they could take him. Several lofty precipices of Gerizim literally overhang the city, any one of which would answer his purpose."—Thomson's *Land and Book*, p. 473.

meant to be, and it is, self-interpreting. The trees, says Jotham, wished a king. They went first to the serviceable trees, whose rule would have been an honour to them; but those trees which really merited to be set in the first place declined empty honour, and preferred to remain in their own humbler but more useful sphere. The trees accordingly were driven in their extremity to the bramble, to the unsightly, useless thorn, for they were resolved rather to have the poorest pretence of a king than none at all. The bramble, with a ludicrous assumption, bids them put trust in his shadow; and at the same time adds a menace which predicts what his reign shall be—one of fierce tyranny and destruction.

The application of the fable is obvious. The people had gone first to the useful man of merit—to Gideon—and besought him to rule over them; but he had declined. To him honour was nothing compared with usefulness. He recognised what he was fit for, and was content with that, foreseeing that if he undertook

duties of another and more showy kind he would be out of his element, and fail to be of service to any one. Abimelech, however, could have no such scruples: he, like the bramble, had no sweet and good fruits, no useful employments to abandon, but could accept the office and honours of the kingship just because he was an inferior man, less occupied, less satisfied with his position, more selfish and ambitious. Accordingly the Shechemites found that in choosing Abimelech they had chosen a bramble, a king who really had neither fruit nor shadow for them, a mere thorny stick that could scourge and tear them, and that was for ever kindling into fire against them and consuming them; and so three years saw them as eager to get rid of their king as they had been to crown him.

Were the application of this fable confined to the era of Abimelech, we should have less interest in it, but we see that it is a felicitous condensation of the principle which regulates the acceptance of many of the high honours

and rewards of life. There are manifestly high and honourable offices which must be occupied, and there is a series of offices and situations leading on to these high rewards, through which a man may reasonably desire to be promoted. There are men who are in their right place at the bottom of the social scale, and in very insignificant positions; there are others who only find their place at the top, and who are never so useful as when at last they occupy the position of highest influence. Some men must sacrifice private comfort, the sweetness of life, pleasant hours of domestic happiness and leisure, for the sake of the public. It will not do for every one to say with the fig tree, Should I forsake my sweetness and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over the trees? For there is a great deal of public work that can only be done by men who are found willing to forsake this sweetness. But things are so interlaced in this world, good and evil are so mixed together, and it is so impossible to find any circumstances in which there is nothing but good, that it be-

comes extremely difficult for a thoughtful man to determine when he ought to accept and when he ought to decline offered honours. It is important, therefore, to recognise, on the one hand, that we cannot decline all honour, and ought not to shrink from advancement in this life, because almost every enlargement of our usefulness brings honour with it, and comes in the shape of a reward for what we have been doing in a smaller sphere; and, on the other hand, we must recognise that it *may* be humility, but it may also be selfish love of ease, which prompts us to say, Should I leave my fatness and my sweetness, and go to be promoted over the trees?

The question, therefore, which men have to answer when invited to some better position in life, or some honourable office, is not, "Am I not more comfortable as I am?" but, "Is this honour a mere honour, a mere title or matter of display? would it bring nothing with it but the greater admiration of my neighbours, or is it an honour because it is a high and useful position?

and will it put into my hands a real and suitable instrument for doing good?" It is very well known that many offices in our own country, as well as in Israel, are allowed to go a-begging, and that being refused by men of parts and character, who ought to occupy them, they devolve upon mere brambles, men who grasp at them to serve their own purposes and gratify their own petty ambition. And thus a great part of the public business of the land, and of the various cities and districts in the land, is done by the men who are the least competent to do it; while the men who ought to be doing it are either pursuing their own private interests, or are at the best occupying much less useful positions. As it was in the days of Jotham so it is now: the men who have energetically and successfully filled a certain position, become too much attached to it to forsake it for any other, even though that other be really better suited to them; whereas the men who have failed, or made very little of their original position, are ready to accept any

other that is offered, for by some perverse and mysterious natural law, incompetency and ambition are very often combined in one character. The fact of a man's being eager to occupy a higher position is not always a sign that he feels himself qualified for it, but is quite as often only a proof that he is ignorant of his own quality and led by a silly ambition, and is incompetent for any higher duties.

But a still wider application of the fable will occur to any one who carefully reads it. For what strikes the reader most is perhaps the sagacious contentment of the olive, the fig, and the vine—a contentment and dread of change, which reproach us for our restlessness and craving to be always bettering ourselves. One feels quite an admiration for the quiet and almost sarcastic caution with which these trees recognise the special good, each of its own position; and it cannot but occur to every one that each of the good trees did recognise the danger of change, and the satisfactoriness of things as they were, while it was the worthless

tree that was glad to abandon its natural position and accept the appearance of honour. What special advantages of life, what particular forms of usefulness and comfort Jotham had in view, if he had any, in choosing these particular trees, it is not easy to say. He puts different words into the mouth of each, as if to indicate some diversity of gift between the fatness of the olive, the sweetness of the fig, the cheering properties of the vine. His language is bold and imaginative, and might even scandalize those people who will take things literally, and might be offended by the assertion that God is cheered by wine. But it is obvious that he meant in a general way to point out that there are two or three functions, or employments, or ways of spending life, so much worth a man's while continuing, that he is wise in refusing to abandon them for the sake of what may seem a better position. It is very desirable that men should see the advantages of their own position, for nothing is more enervating than a craving after change, and

nothing more delusive than the fancy that almost any other position would be better than our own. Nothing gets men into greater difficulties than discontent, for in such a state of mind they will grasp at almost anything that promises change, and so commit themselves to the most unsuitable and harassing positions. And nothing conduces more to peace of mind than that capacity which some men have by nature, and which all may have by cultivating it, of making the most of the circumstances they are in, without weakly fixing their thoughts on everything that is dark and discouraging.

The "fatness" which the olive was not disposed to forsake in exchange for high position, may very naturally be supposed to symbolize the usefulness which belongs to many obscure positions in life. By the very nature of the case, few men can be distinguished—distinctions are distinctions because they are exceptional—the mass of men must find their lot and happiness in something else, and usefulness is happily that which is open to all, and which is calcu-

lated to satisfy all. To do a little portion of the work needed to keep the world a-going, to belong to any trade, craft, business, or profession, that is needed for the sustenance or comfort of men, and to do the work of it carefully, conscientiously, and so as to satisfy one's own idea of how things can best be done, this is the common door by which all of us must enter into contentment. To be useful in the mere mechanical and material parts of life always wins the respect of men; and one who does his work thoroughly well deserves to be contented, even though the work be of no very important kind. If we are filling a place that somebody must fill, if we are doing work which some one must do, then we should be cautious how we seek change. Moreover, in the life of most of us, the usefulness of our daily occupation is by no means the whole measure of our usefulness. We are mixed up in life with persons who are entangled in difficulties, who are full of faults, who are needing help: wherever we go, in whatever occupation we spend our time, we find

this to be the case; and he is a happy man who can disentangle the sinner from the meshes of his sin and pluck his feet out of the net, who can let some tempted person have the strengthening influence of his society, who can give advice that saves from misery or loss. If men would only recognise the purposes God has in view when He sets them in this place or that, and would endeavour to discover what service they can render to the people about them, they would come to receive as coldly as the olive tree any proposals to leave their fatness. There is in the world a kind of recognised course or progress through which a man should advance, a model life, through the various parts of which every person is expected to pass; and persons who are prevented from living such a life, and from attaining the recognised settlements and advantages of it, are apt to feel as if their life were a lost one, whereas they are preserved from the usual routine just in order that they may be more useful in other and more exceptional ways. Surely it is after all a weak

ambition to be like other men. Are we not more likely to do good and be helpful to other men if we pass through a singular experience, and if we do not find fault with the estate in which God calls us; if, unencumbered by what the world thinks honours and blessings, we be left to bring forth our own good fruits in a shady, unnoticed, peaceful corner?

Again, many lives are soured and rendered wretched to all connected with them, because it is not recognised that sweetness is that to which they are specially called. The fig tree did not think it was a necessary of life; it did not flatter itself men could not live without figs; but it was modestly and reasonably conscious that by bearing figs year after year, it did add an element of a most desirable kind to the life of man. And surely there are many persons discontented, soured, and unhappy, ill at ease themselves, and fretting those they live with, simply because they fancy their position is somehow not so pleasant or useful as it might be, and who overlook altogether this

circumstance, that it is to sweeten the lives of others they are called. They may not be absolutely required in the household to which they belong. Things would go on quite as well without them. But if so, they should recognise that over and above absolute necessaries of life, there is a great deal that may be done to brighten and cheer the lives of those we live with. You may not be able quite to bear the burden under which some one near you is bending, but you are able to be loving, and cheerful, and patient, from day to day. You can at least hide your own burden, and by a pious fraud seem unencumbered by care and sorrow. Taking the mere word of the fable, the "sweetness" of the fig, every one knows what a blessing in a household is even one sweet temper, one disposition that is not ruffled, that does not take offence that does not think every one else in the wrong, that does not vaunt itself, but is quiet, reasonable, patient, meek. For some among us, both young and old, there does seem to be

little, if anything else to do, than to live a loving and bright life—to be as cheerful as we can, not to depress those we live with by looks of gloom and indifference; but to put aside our own sorrows, if we have them, and cheer others by our own cheerfulness. It may seem a small thing to do, but, in truth, "he that ruleth his spirit is greater than he that taketh a city;" and it is not the man or woman who has hidden his own pain and grief, and tried to live cheerfully, so as to sweeten the life of another, who will say it is a small thing to do. At all events, whether small or great, it is this which the fable before us shows to be quite worth living for. And therefore it becomes those who sit with gloomy looks and folded hands to consider whether there is no life which they might and ought to sweeten. It is sad to see how often persons, who might quicken one another in every good thing, and might provoke one another to love, do only irritate and vex one another's spirit, and this very much because they do not recognise the

cheerfulness and brightness they might impart to one another, and that one main end to which they are called is to do this very thing. And this is true not only of those who never think what their duty to others is, but of those also who seek to know and to do it, and yet, by some unhappy twist in their own temper, continually do harm where they wish to do good. So few seem to understand the power of sweetness in persuading men, or, if they understand it, cannot control or humble themselves to use it. But "the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God," neither does the positiveness or overbearingness of man accomplish what God righteously intends. And men who would do good must bring themselves to use the instrument which is fit for the end they have in view. The bugle, which is most suitable for giving orders in the roar of a battle and the rattle of musketry, is notperhaps the best instrument for bidding a child to sleep. Peremptoriness is not always equivalent to efficiency. Any one who has tried to catch

an unbridled horse in a field knows how little persuasive power there is in violent language. The assumption of a tone of authority or infallibility defeats the ends of persuasion quite as certainly as the admission of a tone of entreaty destroys the authority of one who should rightfully command.

But a third lesson for individuals in private life, which we gather from this fable, is how contemptible a thing is display and worldly honour, and what is called style. These trees were wise enough to see through it, and to despise it; but how many people have equal wisdom? These trees did not think it so very desirable a thing to be looked up to as occupying a high position, and certainly would not sacrifice either use or comfort to mere display. Now, surely, if there is one vice manifest on the face of society at the present day, it is the craving for show, for making a figure in the eyes of the world. People will not be content to live comfortably, to be moderate in their expenses, quiet in their ways; but must

be doing as other people do, must commit the same extravagancies, even though they have really no taste for them; must deny themselves the enjoyments they prefer, that they may seem to enjoy themselves like their neighbours; bind themselves religiously to do many troublesome things, for no other reason whatever than that it is expected of them. How few persons do you find who are bold enough to live according to their own tastes and judgment; how few who do not cramp their own enjoyment, and even do violence to their own conscience, by considering what will look well in the eyes that are watching them. So we add to our life a number of things that go by the name of luxuries, but which are in reality fetters and burdens, and impose on ourselves countless observances which we hate, but which, for the sake of appearances, we must accept. The consequence is that the spirit becomes false, and the life is worn out by useless forms and meaningless labour; the useful services which might be rendered

are neglected, and time cannot be found for them.

In conclusion, Jotham shall not have spoken this parable in vain for us if we carry away from its perusal the settled conviction that in life there is something better than mere show or the mere attainment of the rewards accorded by the world to its successful men. The real value of human life does not lie on the surface, lies indeed so deep that very many people never see it at all. And they who fancy that its value lies in high position or success, are apt to think, when they find how little satisfaction there is in these, that there is nothing at all in life, and that it matters very little on what a man spends himself. But our Lord would not have come from heaven to enable us to do what was not worth doing: the fact that He thought human life, a life in this very world that we have to live through, worth living, and not only so, but the most capable life possible for spending a Divine fulness of wisdom and goodness in, shows us that there are objects on

which we may liberally spend ourselves, in the persuasion that they will not disappoint us. What these objects are we have already seen, and it is for each of us to find them in his own life, and not to live on without taking thought, or without assuming any guidance of his own ways, and so as to secure that he be of some service to his fellows. Very often, indeed, a man's life is taken out of his own hands, and his course shaped by things beyond his own will: he cannot choose for himself the position in which he would work nor the means he would use in serving God and his neighbour; but if a man will only humbly accept what comes to him, and will submit himself to Providence, to its restrictions, to the changes or the want of change it imposes, and will only strive to do good as he has opportunity, he will not lack the blessing of God, but will be like the vine that cheereth God and man. There are circumstances so afflicting and straitened, so very tormenting and hampering, that we are apt to think we do well if only we do not cry

out and let all the world know how we suffer; but there is a better thing to do always, and that is, to set ourselves with patience and humble self-crucifixion to think of others and do our best for them. In the worst circumstances, in circumstances so perplexing we know not how to act, there always remains some duty we are aware of, some kind and loving thing we can do, and by doing which other duties become clearer. In circumstances so troublous to ourselves that we feel as if the curse of God were resting on us, there remains a something to be done which we could in no other circumstances do, a good fruit to be borne which needs these grievous circumstances as its soil, and which, when it is borne, will be more sweet to our taste eternally than all the happiness which success and pleasure in this world can give.

IV.

JEPHTHAH.

"*And Jephthah came to Mizpah unto his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances: and she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter. And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! thou hast brought me very low, and thou art one of them that trouble me: for I have opened my mouth unto the Lord, and I cannot go back. And she said unto him, My father, if thou hast opened thy mouth unto the Lord, do to me according to that which hath proceeded out of thy mouth.*"—Judges xi. 34–36.

Jephthah.

JUDGES X. 6–XII. 7.

OUR estimate of the general character of any period of history must to a great extent regulate our estimate of its leading men and of their actions. One of the difficulties which the student of any historical character has to overcome, is the difficulty of ascertaining the exact stage of physical and moral development to which that character belonged. To test the antique virtues by a modern standard would be as fallacious as to test the prowess of a mailed warrior by exposing him to the fire of modern artillery instead of to the clothyard shafts of his own times. A man may have been serviceable and admirable in his own day, although by the side of Paul he would seem incongruous, formed on another model, and useless. The

vigorous physique and martial qualities, the muscular strength that could break bows of steel in pieces, the crafty wiles of semi-civilized warriors, were no longer the subject of exulting songs of triumph, when the work given to God's servants was to bring all men to the meek and lowly spirit of Christ. And one great purpose which is served by the long course of Bible history is to widen our minds and invite us to see God's purpose growing towards accomplishment through every generation, however apparently rude and unfit for so high a work, and by means of men most unlike one another.

But no period is more unlike our own times, and therefore further from our sympathies and understanding, than the period of the judges of Israel. As our conception of what we do not perfectly understand is materially aided by comparing it to something we are already acquainted with, this period may perhaps best be apprehended by comparing it to that of the Homeric heroes, or to the lawless and disturbed

times in our own country when robber chieftains could hold a large district under subjection. Though many of the practices were barbarous, it would be a mistake to think of the Israelites of the period as mere savages; for some of the actions which most shock a modern reader of the narrative, such as the cutting up of the Levite's concubine, and distributing the pieces among the tribes of Israel, as well as the horrible outrage which led to this, seem equally to have shocked the Israelites themselves.* And we must also bear in mind that although there was no literature by which the people might be educated, yet there was stirring among them all that gives promise of a literature — love of song and of terse and witty sayings, a knowledge of the art of writing, as well as of those arts in which the mechanical

* "It would be extremely perverse to conclude, from these single outbreaks of savage licentiousness (related in Judges xix.), that such was the condition of all the cities and tribes—the more so since we have seen them followed up by immediate punishment through a powerful movement on the part of the whole people."—Ewald, ii. 354.

and artistic faculties are both employed. Still we do not rightly apprehend the period, nor what was required to be done in it, unless we give full weight to its roughness and fierceness. They were times in which a woman could wile a man to sleep under her roof, and, while he slept, drive a tent-pin through his temples. Like the North-American Indians, the warriors with whom the Israelites engaged called themselves after the lower animals, as the wolf and the raven, that the qualities which fitted them for battle might be recognised. And that the Israelites were not on a much higher level of civilisation themselves, may be gathered from their treatment of Adoni-bezek, whose thumbs and toes they cut off.* They were times when it was possible for a man to maintain himself by heading a band of freebooters; times, as the

* It is true, as Ewald remarks, that Cæsar, who was certainly no barbarbian, was guilty of similar atrocities; but Cæsar felt that apology or excuse was needed, and his contemporary, Cicero, absolutely condemned every such practice, asserting the great principle, *nihil quod crudele utile est.*

narrative before us shows, when human sacrifices were not yet impossible.

It was on men capable of such deeds, men who, like the barons who founded the liberties of our own country, could not read nor sign their own names; men whose hands one day held the plough or the pruning knife, and the next day the sword; it was on such men as these, we read, that the Spirit of God came, impelling them to rise and do battle for Israel. And it strikes every reader of this book that while in it, more than in any other book of the Old Testament, reference is made to the Spirit of God as instigating and empowering men, the deeds to which He impels them are anything but what we are accustomed to call spiritual. They were deeds for the most part of martial prowess. Still, it was deeds of this kind which were then needed to forward God's purpose with the world. And to do these deeds the Spirit enabled those who were chosen for the work; not supernaturally investing them with a refinement of character or sanctity of disposition

which would have been incongruous with the times in which they lived. The judges went to their work in the strength of Jehovah, believing in Him as more powerful than all that could be against them, and believing also that it was His will to free His people from all oppression. They had, that is to say, faith in God; and what they did, as we are told in the Epistle to the Hebrews, they did by faith. It was this belief that gave them courage and success. But faith is the property of children as well as, or indeed much more than, of men of mature understanding; and how little understanding the Israelites yet had of the God who had adopted them is sufficiently shown by the story of Jephthah.* God does not supersede nature in the development of the character either of individuals or of nations. He takes men as he finds them, and through the blunders and vices of their present stage leads them on

* Kuenen, after the usual display of critical acumen in sifting the truth from the error in the narrative, reaches substantially the same results which the ordinary reader of the book of Judges arrives at.

to something higher and better. He is the ever-watchful husbandman, but the vine is not by His care or Spirit made independent of the great laws on which He has ordained that all growth shall proceed.

As is frequently the case, the chief interest and instructiveness of Jephthah's career gather round that event in his life which to himself and his contemporaries might seem to mar its symmetry and destroy its usefulness. It is the great blunder of his life, his unfortunate vow, which unceasingly draws back men's attention to him. He knew enough of war to understand that this undertaking he had entered into against the Ammonites would either make or mar him. It was the golden opportunity that comes once in a man's life. Through all his nature he was moved in prospect of the approaching battle. It made him thoughtful, concentrated, grave. He felt more than usually thrown back upon God's help; he wished to feel sure of God, and so, according to his light, vowed a vow, and said, "If thou shalt

without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, then it shall be that whatsoever * cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it for a burnt-offering."

Was it right of Jephthah to make a vow? We know he was wrong in the terms of it, but was he wrong in making any vow in the circumstances? It is open to any one to say that he had a merely heathen idea of God, as a Being to be bribed, to be secured by gifts and promises. It was very common with heathen generals to record such a vow before engaging; and it is common still to see men who wish to acknowledge God in some way, but don't know how to do it. They wish to be religious, think it a good and right thing, but neither knowing nor loving God, they are pitiably awkward in their demonstrations of religious feeling. Perhaps it has been your lot to hear the grossly selfish promises some sick men make,

* It should be observed that the Septuagint fearlessly, and in accordance with the view adopted below, translate this "whosoever."

fancying this to be religion ; their greedy lust of the world and of life prompts them to promise God anything if only they get well, and they think this a good state of spirit. And there are more subtle and disguised ways in which the same superstitious vowing goes on. Have you never found yourself seeking success in something, and endeavouring to get God on your side to secure it, by the unworded tacit promise to live better ? You feel encouraged to hope for God's help, because you will conform your life more to His will—as if you could live better without getting God's help for this also —as if everything with which you propose to coax or bribe God into aiding you must not itself be taken from God's own treasury.

But as we have no distinct evidence regarding Jephthah's state of mind in making this vow, it is the part of charity to believe that though he was incomprehensibly rash in the terms of his vow, yet he was justified in vowing to make some offering to God should He deliver the Ammonites into his hand.

But there remains the more important question: Supposing him to have been right in making the vow, was he right in keeping it? Might he or might he not have broken his promise to God when he saw what it had involved him in? Some persons seem to confound a promise made to God and a promise to man, and to apply to the one the same rule as to the other. They argue that as you cannot break a promise to man, even though you find you have sworn to your own hurt, so neither can you break a vow made to God. Luther, *e.g.*, has been freely blamed on this ground for breaking his monastic vow, and marrying. But the distinction between a promise to man and a vow to God is sufficiently obvious.* When you

* The distinction is made by Paley in his *Moral Philosophy*, and is admirably expanded by a writer in the *Spectator* for 29th Dec., 1866, from which we extract the following:—"To keep a vow to God merely as we would keep a human contract, even though we regret it and reproach ourselves with making it; to deal with Him as Jephthah did when he promised to sacrifice the first living thing that met him on his return home; to treat Him as a Being who expects us to keep our bargains literally, even

have made a promise or entered into an engagement or contract with a man, and it turns out to be to your disadvantage to keep it, it may still be to the other party's advantage, and you are not entitled to defraud him of his interest in the transaction. However much you dislike fulfilling the agreement, you cannot break faith with him, unless it is positively sinful to fulfil it. But the case often happens that both parties to a contract eventually see it to be wise to fall from it; and where both parties honestly and heartily wish it cancelled, to fulfil it ceases to be a duty. Two men are very foolish or stubborn who fulfil an agreement which they both see to be disadvantageous, and wish to fall away from. No duty whatever compels them to fulfil it, and if they do so they are justly the laughing-stock of their acquaint-

when we recognize that such bargains were rash and evil; is to think of God as a heathen deity, who lives outside us, and neither knows nor cares what judgment we pass upon ourselves for having made such a bargain; whereas He is really at the very centre of the thought which condemns the bargain, and it is His spirit, not our own, which tells us it was rash and wrong."

ances. Now, this is precisely the case in which a man finds himself who has vowed to God what turns out to be sinful, for God can never wish him to fulfil a contract which, he now sees, involves sin. A man swears to do a certain thing because he thinks it will be pleasing to God, but if he discovers that, instead of being pleasing, it will be hateful to God, to perform his vow, and do that vowed but hateful thing, is to insult God. By the very discovery of the sinfulness of a vow, the maker of it is absolved from performing it. God shrinks much more than he can do from the perpetration of sin. Both parties fall from the agreement.

But it has, as you must be aware, often been urged that Jephthah did *not* keep his vow, but compromised the matter by causing her to take a vow of virginity—to become a nun, in fact. In a question thus debated one can, of course, only give his own opinion, but this supposition does seem to me to sacrifice the plain and obvious interpretation of the narrative. It is

distinctly said that Jephthah's vow ran in these terms: "Whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me shall surely be the Lord's, and *I will offer it up for a burnt-offering*." In verse 39 we are as plainly informed that her father *did with her according to the vow* which he had vowed. If he did not offer her as a burnt-offering, then he did not do with her according to the vow. Moreover, why all this wailing and anguish if, after all, all that was going to happen to her is what happens to thousands who seem to stand in little need of compassion? Then, again, why did she ask for the one favour of a respite of two months to bewail her virginity, if she was to have thirty or forty years with leisure for that purpose? And, lastly, if the mere fact of her remaining unmarried fulfilled even that part of the vow which specified that she was to be the Lord's, then what objection can we make to other young women giving themselves to the Lord in the same way? If Jephthah's daughter became a nun, and if this was judged a fulfil-

ment of his vow, if by being a virgin she was somehow more the Lord's than by being a married woman, a stronger foundation need not be sought for the establishment of nunneries.*

It is, indeed, no wonder that men of any sensibility should have turned every stone to find a reason for escaping the conclusion that Jephthah, like a second Abraham, but guided by a different spirit, should have led his daughter to the altar, and have thought he was doing God service. It is true, human sacrifice was no uncommon thing in those days, and there is reason to fear that the Israelites did not keep themselves pure from the unnatural worship of Moloch; but the sacrifice of a full-grown maiden by her own father finds only one or two parallels in history, and these have always lived in men's memories as among the most piteous and tragic of events. There is a tenderness of affection which sub-

* It will be understood that the foregoing paragraph is written with the utmost respect for those who hold the opposite view, that Jephthah did not slay his daughter.

sists between father and daughter which is altogether peculiar and of its own kind. The relation of father and son has its own beauty and interest, but of all the various relationships wherewith God enlarges our hearts and beautifies our life, there is none more tender and graceful than that which subsists between father and daughter — between the rough, active man, who has seen the passions and vices of men, war and the world, and the cherished daughter of his home, who gives him as much strength, by her dependence on him and by her innocence, as he gives her by his protection. It was this that caused Jephthah to rend his clothes in dismay, and exclaim, "Alas, my daughter! thou hast brought me very low."

Jephthah's daughter is plainly one of the highest maidenly characters you anywhere, either in sacred or profane history, or in actual life, meet with. You cannot fail to be struck with her promptitude in accepting, without any murmur, without hesitation, without sur-

prise even, the fearful doom which was brought upon her by her father's rashness—the beautiful and exquisitely delicate tenderness with which she sees his difficulty, and hastens, at the cost of all her own hopes and life, to relieve him; her piety, filial and godly; her self-sacrifice; her maidenly ambition and her maidenly modesty; everything about her so pure, so dutiful, so self-ignoring, so wise in love, and all sacrificed to the superstition of a hot-headed warrior. Better certainly that, if the sacrifice were to be, it should be rendered in such a spirit by the victim; better that she should die collected, resolute, willing and pure, than that she should be carried screaming to the altar, or imprecating curses on her unhappy father. We can scarcely help thinking that if the sacrifice itself was horrible, her spirit, the spirit of the sacrifice, was acceptable to God, and that while what she did in ignorance was pardoned, what she did through reverence and dutiful submission to her father was accepted.

Still, one cannot but join with her in bewailing the abrupt and terrible close of her precious young life—cannot but lament that so much nobleness and purity of character should have been lost, and needlessly lost, to Israel; for the hope of any community very much lies in its young women. But it is this wail of Jephthah's daughter that rises from every generation of this world's history. What we are all of us called upon to see with our own eyes, and judge with our own hearts, is a similar, or much more grievous waste of all that is good in human nature, of devotedness to country and family, of fine feeling, of the best intellect. Again and again, in our own society, we see the most splendid mental abilities squandered in the quest of what can never be discovered, the truest eloquence and highest moral feeling consecrated to a cause that is not worth lifting a finger to defend. Who has not seen the most precious human feelings wasted, you would say, on worthless people, while they

might have fertilised and enriched responsive natures — the noblest devotedness sacrificed to a mere lie, or deception, or mockery? Two months was not too long to weep over the dreadful misguidedness of human actions, and the consequent waste or outward unprofitableness of what is best in human nature.

Still, there is a compensating element even here. These companions who sympathised with their friend, and at last decked her as if for her bridal, and* gave her into her father's hands, must no doubt have felt to the close of life that a world in which anything so tragic could happen was a blighted, melancholy world.

* The often cited lines of the *Antigone* of Sophocles may once again be referred to, as illustrating the ancient feeling regarding a virgin's death :—

"Alone he leads me, who has room for all,
Hades, the lord of death,
To Acheron's dark shore,
With neither part nor lot in marriage rites,
No marriage hymn resounding in my ears,
But Acheron shall claim me as his bride."

Line 809. *Comp. also line* 915.

Still, as they themselves passed through the various womanly duties that fell to them, and felt still the hold that event had taken; as they told the story of the noble maiden to their own children, and found how it moved and controlled them, and how many, through that example, were urged to more self-sacrificing deeds, and to higher thoughts about what is beautiful and good in life; must not these women sometimes have thought that possibly the real children of Jephthah's daughter, those who had truly succeeded to her nature, were more and better than could have been hers, had she lived? If then by family circumstances, or in any other way, we are called upon to sacrifice our own will to what seems a very needless, provoking, and rash plan, what we have to do is to seek to have something of the spirit of Jephthah's daughter, and accept our position without a murmur; knowing that, though we do not see *how*, any more than she did, this may, and will, by God's blessing, result in such development of our own character, and

such enlargement of our usefulness, as could not otherwise be attained.

In conclusion, notice the last scene in connection with this expedition of Jephthah against the Ammonites. The Ephraimites came to him with precisely the complaint they had made to Gideon. Their pride was hurt that they had not been invited to join the expedition. Possibly, in the first instance, they had really been hurt at the neglect; probably they now only wished to share the spoil on a false plea. They knew what had been going on, but did not wish to aid Jephthah. So quickly, often, and so certainly does mere pretence take the place of real good feeling; so speedily does right action, if it has been successful, degenerate into the mere imitation of right action, into a spurious and fictitious manner of conduct. Jephthah tells them plainly they are deceivers, and that if they are disposed to quarrel with him, they are welcome to do so. Accordingly, a battle is fought, Ephraim is put to flight, and Jeph-

thah's Gileadites take the fords of Jordan, to cut off their enemy from escape. But how are they to distinguish friend from foe as they hurry in one undistinguishable mass to the river? Some quick-witted man among them proposes an easy mode of effectually discriminating friend from foe. There was a slight difference of pronunciation in the land of Ephraim. The men born there had a difficulty in pronouncing *s*, *h*, — as each of our own counties has its own peculiar dialect, which most of us who have any ear can readily enough distinguish. It is proposed, therefore, to seize each man as he is plunging into the stream, and put him to the test by asking him to name the Hebrew word for *stream*. If he could say, Shibboleth, he was allowed to go his way; but if he said Sibboleth, it was the last word he was allowed to utter.

It is worth our while then to notice the perfect efficiency of this test. It was a very slight thing, a thing which perhaps many of the Ephraimites had never noticed as a peculiarity

of their own; but this dropping of a letter, or scarcely a letter, but only an aspirate, was their death-warrant. And with perfect justice, because that slight peculiarity infallibly showed to what tribe they belonged, and under whose standard they had been fighting. It is often just such a slight peculiarity which identifies men as belonging to a certain district or family. You know whose son a man is by some motion of his hands or by his walk, by the fall of a lock of hair or the way he lifts his eye: so also some very slight peculiarity in our conduct or conversation is a sufficient index to our whole state. In our Lord's account of the last judgment He describes all men as expressing astonishment that they should be so summarily dealt with, should be allotted to their irrevocable destinies on grounds apparently so trivial. Is it fair that a man should lose eternity, should be banished from life and hope without appeal, simply because on some occasion he had neglected to give a beggar boy a penny, or omitted to visit

a sick person? Is it really reasonable that for some trifle of this kind a man should be everlastingly damned, irretrievably and once for all cast in judgment? You will think that it is quite reasonable if, in the light of this incident, you consider that the little things a man does or neglects to do are infallible symptoms of his character. These Ephraimites were not slain because the Gileadites thought it a heinous crime to drop the *h;* but their blood dyed the Jordan because it was Ephraimite blood, and this was manifested by their little peculiarity. And so in a thousand ways that God observes, and that even men of any spiritual insight or keenness of observation notice, we are in little things revealing our character, and in the final judgment one of these little things will be sufficient to condemn us. To be a little vain, or somewhat niggardly to the poor; to indulge now and then in worldly pleasure, and get entangled in its gaieties; to drop an occasional oath, or, when hard pushed, to have recourse to a lie or deceit; such things as these,

you think, cannot doom you to everlasting misery. We would not wish, you maintain, to serve a God who could stand on such trivial matters; we despise a government that would take notice of such petty offences. No doubt; but what if these little things are the dropping of the *h*, that shows to which tribe you belong? What if they are the certain indications of a character that is, at the core, in separation from God and hateful to Him?

And if you doubt whether these trivial things, in which you find you are not quite in harmony with God's word, are really indications of your true character, or only faults unnatural to you, but which you fall into through strong temptation, there is a very ready test by which you may satisfy yourself. Try and put away these little faults: if you succeed, then you are safe. But the faults of your *character*, the little actions that truly express what is in you, you cannot so easily put off. There often arise circumstances even in this life in which a more holy and decided character than we possess

were most desirable: we could pass through what has come upon us in a vastly more satisfactory way if only we were other kind of men than we are; but this is impossible. These Ephraimites could not for the nonce become Gileadites; not for their life could they make that little change in their mode of speech. And so we cannot, on the sudden, change ourselves. If certain little things about you make you suspect you belong to the wrong tribe; if there are little flaws in your conduct which you find extremely hard to remove, and which hint to you that perhaps or probably the very roots of your character are wrong; then go quickly to God, for you have but this one resource and way of escape, and offer to forsake your old tribe, to be born again, and beseech His grace to effect in you a thorough and real change of heart, such as He has effected in many.

V.

SAMSON.

"*And she made him sleep upon her knees; and she called for a man, and she caused him to shave off the seven locks of his head; and she began to afflict him, and his strength went from him. And she said, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist not that the Lord was departed from him. But the Philistines took him, and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison house. Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again after he was shaven.*"—Judges xvi. 19–22.

Samson.

JUDGES XIII.–XVI.

IN analyzing any Old Testament narrative that we may find in it what is true for all time, we must first of all get hold of some rational principle of interpretation. We must not give ourselves up to the leading of mere fancy. If you merely wish to find analogies and figures for New Testament truth, that is very easy and very profitless work. It is easy to allegorize the whole life of Samson—easy, for example, to find in his falling in love with a selfish and faithless Philistine woman a type of our Lord's loving the Church, alien as she was, and unloving and apt to betray Him; in Samson's slaying the lion that met him on his way to his bride at Timnath, and finding honey in the carcase when he

returned, you may, if you please, see a picture of Christ fighting His way to His bride through many dangers, and of His bringing meat and refreshment out of the most roaring and formidable and ravenous of His foes, even out of death itself. In the thirty Philistines vaunting their solution of Samson's riddle after they had coaxed and threatened it out of his bride, you may think you see a very apt and significant and not too sarcastic a representation of the men of science and philosophers of the present day who vaunt their knowledge of all the mysteries of nature, human and Divine, while they forget that this their enlightenment is at bottom due to the discovery Christ has made to His Church of the deepest problems of existence; that they could never have made these discoveries any more than the Greeks and Romans but for the impulse which Christianity has given to all knowledge, and for the actual disclosures made by Christ on earth for the sake of His Church. You may thus give the rein to fancy, and you may

possibly thus find in the narrative figures, or substantial forms, for some edifying truth; but this is not to interpret Scripture. If we wish honestly to make out what God did and taught through Samson, we must ask ourselves not what any fanciful mind can now, in the light of the New Testament, bring out of the narrative, but what good did the contemporaries of Samson receive from him, and what impressions were produced in their minds by his career? These old heroes were sent, not for the mere sake of being types of Christ so that now we can look back upon them and see a reflection of Christ, but they were sent that in the first place they might be deliverers to their own generation, and as such we must study them.

First, then, we must find an answer to this question, What principles, regarding the way in which God works deliverances for man, were taught by Samson? And obviously the first principle impressed on the minds of his contemporaries must have been that "in a state of universal depression all must ultimately depend

on the indomitable strength which is aroused in individuals."* God loves to deliver His people from the multitudes of their enemies by single champions. This was never brought so prominently out as in the life of Samson. The other judges were backed by the people: the movement for freedom began with them individually, but the mass of the people rose at their call. But Samson, throughout, fought the Philistines single-handed. He despised their whole collected armies, went down alone into their strongest cities, and, when they would shut him in, carried away gates and bars in the grim satiric mood that was his fighting humour; and that was the nearest approach to seriousness the presence of armed enemies could induce. Samson was qualified by his natural gifts thus to stand alone and to hearten the people, and give them more courageous and hopeful thoughts. It was not more his great physical strength than the blythe and daring

* Ewald, *Hist.* ii. 399. See also Stanley's *Jewish Church*, i. 364.

manner in which he used it that impressed the people and solaced the weaker men who could not imitate him. His name, Samson, refers not to his strength, but to his temper. It means "Sunny."* This was what the people saw in him—an inexhaustible joyousness of disposition that buoyed him up in danger and difficulty, and made him seem to the down-trodden people, whose future was clouded and gloomy, as the sun rising upon and cheering them. This joyousness comes out in the lightheartedness with which he fights against countless odds; in his taste for witty sayings and riddles; and in the gigantic practical jokes he perpetrated in carrying off the gates of Gaza, and in tying the foxes tail to tail, and sending them through the standing corn with burning brands.† Nothing could have been better calculated to reanimate Israel,

* So Milton, in the magnificent passage in the *Reason of Church Government*, in which he compares a king to Samson, speaks of "his illustrious and sunny locks waving and curling about his godlike shoulders."

† See Stanley, as above.

when oppressed by the Philistines, than a spirit like this which could treat them with such contempt. And in sending this judge to Israel God meant the people to admire and catch his spirit; He meant them to see that He expects His people to be "sunny," to overflow with health and vivacity even under protracted misfortune and strife. And this God produced in them not by giving His Spirit, as a spirit of joy and vigour, to all, but to one man only.

This therefore must be our first practical lesson—viz., how much can be done by individuals. The temper of all of us is indolent in things spiritual: we shrink from everything heroic, from everything that goes beyond the actions of our neighbours. We need, therefore, to be reminded that grievances in society will not reform themselves, nor will be reformed by the whole community awaking to them, but that some individual must take each grievance in hand until it is mastered. How often does it happen, if we are living with our eyes open, that we see evil being done, some hurtful in-

fluence spreading, and we are filled with shame that we cannot strike in and put a stop to it. This thing and that should be altered and reformed, yet we shrink from undertaking it. We have not public spirit enough; have not the unselfishness of the men who fix upon some definite evil and give their life to its eradication; have not the gallantry of Samson, who picked quarrels with the Philistines as often as he could, that he might rid his country of oppression. In this certainly this judge was a type of Christ, who, single-handed, encountered and overcame those essential evils which keep us back from God, who did battle for us and by His single strength delivered us from every bondage, who "trod the wine-press alone."

A second principle illustrated by the life of Samson is that God has often to deliver His people in spite of themselves. This was impressed on the minds of all observant persons by the fact that the Israelites, instead of flocking to Samson's standard and seconding

his effort to throw off the Philistian yoke, bound him and gave him into the hands of the Philistines, complaining bitterly that he had brought them into trouble with their masters, and willing to buy peace at the price of Samson's life. Just as the Pharisees said of our Lord: If we let Him thus alone the Romans will come and take away our place and nation; and subsequently gave Him up bound to the Romans. They would not strike a blow in defence of their own liberty, still less in defence of their champion. These 3,000 men of Judah, armed and equipped, stood by as idle spectators whilst Samson burst the bonds they had bound upon him, and, snatching up the only weapon he could see, the jawbone of an ass, fell upon the common enemy, and slaughtered as many as did not flee. Put yourself into the position of these abject and cowardly men of Judah, and you will see that they must have been deeply ashamed of their pusillanimity and treachery to themselves in delivering up Samson; and must have seen that God meant to deliver them,

and had delivered them, in spite of themselves.

Every one who has endeavoured anything for the good of others, knows how common a spirit is that of the men of Judah. People for the most part don't wish to be elevated, enlightened, purified; if advancement gives them the least trouble, they prefer to remain as they are, and turn angrily upon those who stir them up to higher things. They need to be helped in spite of themselves. *That* man will not prove a very efficient social reformer who refuses to help any but those who help themselves, who is dismayed when he finds his intentions are misunderstood, who cannot, like Samson, patiently submit to abuse from those whose best friend he is, and have them undoing his work for them almost as fast as he does it. Instead of being vexed beyond consolation at such treachery, let us ask if we are not ourselves among those who think it better to sit down under a grievance than make a bold push for its extirpation. We must, I fear, all plead

guilty to a similar treachery to our own best interests, and acknowledge that if saved it must be in great part in spite of ourselves. Like these men of Judah we prefer respectable and comfortable subjection to sin, to hard-won freedom: we become reconciled to the dominion of foolish and hurtful lusts. Some sins don't *seem* to do us much harm: they do not brand us as slaves, nor bind us with fetters that audibly clank; their bondage is like that of the Philistines, mixed with some advantages and comforts: whereas, to rid ourselves of them is a painful and difficult and humiliating work — a work that throws us out of comfortable, easy-going relations with the world, and makes life a more dangerous and toilsome thing; and, therefore, we do not second our Redeemer when He would deliver us from such sins. And would that we felt the shame of this treachery as the men of Judah felt it; for is it not true that indolence, love of ease, fear of putting ourselves into unusual and difficult circumstances are thwarting the Saviour's work

in many of us, and if we are to be saved at all, it will be with bitter shame and regret, that while we laid heavy burdens and grievous to be borne on our Redeemer, we ourselves would not touch them with one of our fingers.

But a third principle about God's deliverances was lodged in the minds of the people by Samson's career — viz., that the greatest deliverances are wrought by self-sacrifice, or, as they themselves expressed it, "the dead which Samson slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life." Through mere love of fighting, and in the joy of battle, which is a selfish gratification to a strong man, he had slain many: in the mere overflow of physical vigour and exuberance of his own spirits, he had borne down the enemies of God; but his greatest victory, the most overwhelming and appalling blow he struck, was when he himself was humbled to the dust, when life had lost its charm, when no joy for himself was thought of, and when his only

motive was to assert the might of Jehovah against the boastful worshippers of Dagon. It cost him his own life, but his life could not have been better spent. Those former victories, in which he sustained no hurt, displayed no devotion, no character, scarcely any daring—for he trusted in his talisman of hair, and knew he could overpower all opposition. But in his death his heroism first appears; and we understand how he should be enrolled among the glorious names of history; we forget all his faults in his noble disregard of his own life, in his magnanimous scorn of those Philistines and their god. In this one moment, as he bows his mighty frame between the two pillars, a new light shines upon him, and we see that he is indeed a saviour worthy of Israel and worthy of God. Would not every one go with his brethren and gather out the mangled remains of the hero, and tenderly separate them from the carcases of his enemies, and carry them up to the burial-place of his fathers, in pledge that his spirit too had been gathered to the assembly

of the faithful, who "loved not their lives unto the death, but laid them down for the brethren"?

We need not pause to show how this principle was displayed in the great salvation; how the death of Christ accomplished more than His life—rather let us reflect that whatever we do for our fellows and for God, it is not always our greatest activity that is most truly successful. You cannot measure the good a man does by the length of time he is about it, or the diligence he shows in it. One moment of true devotion effects more than a lifetime of labour. This is what is needed if we are to do good. In the family, in society, anywhere or anyhow, it is all the same; this is the one requisite for the highest kind of efficiency, a heart going out more to others than resting in self; a spirit of genuine devotion to a great cause, or to the people round about you—that is what all men acknowledge to be a real blessing and gift of God in their midst. But seldom do we see it, save in men whose experience has been some-

thing like Samson's, who have sat in darkness and the shadow of death, the light of whose life has been extinguished, and their hearts brought down with affliction and labour.

These, then, are the three principles which the life of Samson sets vividly before us, that the good which is done on earth is mostly done by individuals; that it has often to be done in spite of the indifference or opposition of those for whom it is undertaken; and that to accomplish the highest and greatest good, men must devote themselves. But an equally important inquiry remains: for those of you who really wish to understand how God means you to serve Him, must be asking: What was it that constituted Samson's strength? And in answer to this, Samson's life says: First of all, his strength was not the natural physical strength that accompanies a powerful frame and well-developed muscle. It was not this, because it vanished when his hair was cut off, and grew again with his hair. That his strength was, strictly speaking, supernatural, you would con-

clude also from the manifestations of it, which were not merely extraordinary, but superhuman. But the fact that it disappeared when he lost his hair, which has no such natural connection with a man's strength that in other cases a similar result follows, this is the final proof that his strength was supernatural. Probably he had a powerful frame by nature, just as a powerful engine needs a substantial frame, but this frame was not his strength.

Then, secondly, neither did his strength or success consist in his skill in the use of his weapons, or choice of the most effective weapons. On the contrary, the greatest slaughter he ever made with a weapon was when he flew upon the well-armed Philistines with the jawbone of an ass he had hastily picked up. This struck Samson himself so much, that he called the scene of the achievement 'Lehi,' or *the Jawbone*, and composed a witty epigram on the subject, the point of which, however, is lost in our translation. And as it gave him thoughts, and revealed to him the

secret of his success, and encouraged him, so it may well give encouraging thoughts to us all. When God has work for you to do, a conquest for you to make, a deliverance of others for you to effect, He will not leave you without a weapon; it may not always be a very promising one, but still a weapon. Samson might, no doubt, have slain more with a sword if he had had one; and so it is well that in all you do for God you provide yourself with as likely weapons as you can possibly get. But sometimes you find yourself, like Samson, in circumstances where you must act quickly, and where you cannot provide yourself with what you might think the best weapon, but must take the first that comes to hand. You are, *e.g.*, suddenly prompted by your conscience to say a word of rebuke to some profane or wicked person, or a word of warning to some one who is, as you know, casting off even ordinary restraints, and giving way to evil passions; but you feel your want of wisdom and fluency; you know you can never say a

thing as it ought to be said—you wish you could, you wish you were well enough equipped for this, which you feel to be really a desirable duty. Now in such circumstances it is more than half the battle to attempt the duty with such weapon as we have, in the faith that God will help us. A rude weapon, wielded by a vigorous arm, and by one confident in God, did more than the fine swords of these men of Judah, who had no spirit in them; and in very much of the good that we are all called upon to do to one another in this world, it is the spirit in which we do it that tells far more than the outward thing we do. And it is a good thing to be reduced to reliance, not on the weapon you use, but on the Spirit who uses you. Samson found it so, and gave a name to that period of his history where he learned this; and so does every one look back gratefully to the time when he distinctly became aware that efficiency in duty depends on God's taking us and using us as His weapons.

But, thirdly, in that same encounter, Sam-

son learned another thing about his strength, viz., that it must be sustained by the ordinary means of life. He was faint with thirst after the slaughter of the Philistines, so spent and exhausted that he seemed about to die. And God opened a spring in the earth to refresh him—did not infuse new energy into him by some unseen and supernatural agency, but gave him water. Could anything more clearly teach us that our spiritual life, though dependent on God's Spirit dwelling in us, must also be nourished by the means of grace that are within our own reach? It is a most idle fancy that because we are dependent on the Spirit for all spiritual strength, therefore we need not trouble ourselves with efforts of our own—an obviously idle fancy, and yet how many of us it is ensnaring. We do nothing that we can seriously think is sufficient to maintain spiritual energy, and then, forsooth, we wonder that we are unfit for duty, and failures as Christians. Samson was as dependent on water as other men; and unless we put forth the same

efforts that men would put forth who did not believe in the Spirit, and were yet resolved to master sin and do their duty, we shall fail. Nothing that the Spirit does supersedes our own efforts. Unless you avail yourself of every means you think likely to maintain a healthy tone in you, you will sink exhausted. And if you really seek means of grace you will find all the earth round about you bursting up with wells of life; everything you engage in will become nourishment to your spirit; you will be chastened, encouraged, strengthened by the most unlikely means.

Fourthly. But while all these are truths about Samson's strength which are profitable for us to remember, the grand idea of Samson's life is that his strength abode with him so long as he was faithful to his Nazarite vow, and departed as soon as, for the sake of a fleshly lust, he tampered with that vow, and put himself into the power of Delilah and the enemies of the God of Israel. Before his birth he was consecrated to God: his parents dedicated him

to the work God meant him to do upon earth, and he himself accepted the vows they had made for him. With some right feeling of the sanctity of the call of God he had listened to it, and allowed his hair to grow as the visible pledge that he was under vow to God. When a Nazarite cut his hair it was understood that his vow was at an end, and that he no longer was God's servant. This Samson would never have done with his own hand; but, overcome by sensual indulgence, and giving way to the solicitation of a harlot, whom he knew to be also in league with his enemies, and a traitress, he recklessly put himself into her hands. Had she cut off his hair without any connivance of his own, this would, of course, have wrought no alteration in his spiritual state, nor any diminution of his strength. But the loss of his hair being due to his own recklessness, to his almost deliberate sale of God's favour for this harlot's endearments, to his want of zeal or even of ordinary prudence in guarding the Divine gift—for he knew he was in danger,

and at first scrupled to tell her his secret—the loss of his hair, thus representing a loss of spiritual life, a loss of a fit apprehension of the sacredness of his person as one vowed to God, was immediately followed by loss of strength. It was a simple struggle of flesh and spirit, and flesh won, and the spirit left the field to the conqueror.

There is no picture in the Bible, or perhaps in all history, more pathetic than that of Samson after his fall: the mighty, sunny Samson, the flash of whose eye had unnerved his enemies, fettered now in the Philistine dungeon, deprived of the light of day, set to grind like a woman, and dragged out to be the jest and scorn of his insolent conquerors. Jeremiah's lamentation might have been uttered over him: "Her Nazarites were purer than snow, they were whiter than milk, they were more ruddy in body than rubies, their polishing was of sapphire. Their visage is blacker than a coal, they are not known in the streets, their skin cleaveth to their bones; it is withered, it

is become like a stick." Were circumstances ever calculated to inflict a keener, more overwhelming shame than when this mighty champion, who had never encountered resistance and had never conceived the possibility of defeat, who had borne everything before him in one uninterrupted tide of victory, suddenly found himself hopelessly in the hands of his enemies, his eyes put out, his strength all gone from him, and with it all token of the favour of God? Was ever a dungeon inhabited by gloomier thoughts, was ever a more pitiable humiliation than that of this forlorn captive, far from his friends, far from his God, for ever shut out from the light, and, he feared, from the light of God's presence, pursued by the thought of his own mad folly, and low lust, and reckless forsaking of God that had brought all this upon him?

Especially touching is it to read that when he awoke on Delilah's lap he said, "I will go out, as at other times, and shake myself. And he wist not that the Lord was departed from him." The Spirit had been wont to come

upon him in gusts, impelling him as in a kind of frenzy, and he thought he could now be the same—thought he could shake off this unwonted lassitude he felt, and imitate the mighty inspiration of the Spirit of God. In every previous case, when occasion had presented itself to attack the Philistines, and when his own spirit urged him to battle, it was because "the spirit of the Lord had come mightily upon him." He expected the same backing now. He did not know the extent of the damage; he wist not that the Lord was departed from him. Some of you may have had an experience which puts you into sympathy with, and enables you to interpret easily, this part of Samson's history. You may at one time have had grace, you may have been equal to duty, you may have found it easy to pray, easy to engage in religious conversation, easy to do service among your fellows that not every one can do; but through carelessness, through want of considerate prizing of this as God's grace bestowed in trust upon you, through sensual indulgence, you have

quenched the Spirit, and now you in vain seek to stir up the grace of God that was once in you; you imitate the influence of the Spirit, you try to exert and move yourself, but it will not do. You say, "I will go out, as at other times, and shake myself;" but the Lord has departed from you. You throw yourself into a devout frame, you make a desperate effort to be moved, you imitate the movements of spirit, the feelings, the aspirations to which once the Spirit of God moved you; but it is mere imitation, not the reality; your efforts consequently are thwarted, you find that your spiritual strength is gone, that there is now hollowness, feebleness, and a blank where once was the Almighty Spirit. He that has vowed his strength to God, he that has received some grace from God, some godliness of feeling and aim, and yet yields to a wretched lust, fancying that afterwards he will shake himself as at other times and be as fit for duty as ever, will find himself most disastrously deceived. He will find that the whole power has gone out of his

life, and that he is left helpless, ashamed, miserable. Are there none of us who should take Samson's humiliation to heart, none of us who are as reckless as he in the use we make of the gifts God has given us? We also were, like him, vowed to God before we had consciousness of our own, and we have received some grace or gift with which to serve Him; but how many barter these gifts for the most contemptible indulgence of the flesh, or for the gratification of a small ambition, or for a little portion of the world's goods!

But, in conclusion, observe how God returned to Samson, and gave him back his strength. There is no better instance of the use God can make of the wreck of an ill-spent life. He had ruined himself beyond repair for this life; he could never be the man he was; but in those lonely days in the Philistine prison-house, when his blindness cut him off from converse with outward things, his own humbling, remorseful thoughts were his com-

pany, his own past life his only view. He saw the ruinous folly he had been guilty of, saw his betrayal of the trust God had reposed in him, saw that out of the best material for a life of glory that any man of that period had received he had wrought for himself a life of shame and a degrading end. His heart was broken; the strong man was crushed, and had, like the weakest sinner, to cry to God, to seek that last comfort that abides when all others are gone, and that more than makes up for the loss of all others—to seek that light, the light of God's own presence, that restores brightness to the most darkened life, and that does not refuse to shine on the most benighted soul. And what he sought, he found. Slowly his hair grew, and with it slowly returned his strength: as health comes slowly back to the man that has been shattered by disease or accident—as spiritual vigour slowly returns to him who by one rash act has let his soul be trodden in the dust. If you have fallen into sin, you must not

expect your soul to recover its tone quickly; it is like the growth of hair, you cannot hasten it, can only let repentance slowly work its perfect work, thankful that even thus you may get back to God.

VI.

ELI.

"*Wherefore the Lord God of Israel saith, I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the Lord saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed. . . . And I will raise me up a faithful priest, that shall do according to that which is in mine heart and in my mind: and I will build him a sure house; and he shall walk before mine anointed for ever.*"—1 Sam. ii. 30, 35.

Eli.

JUDGES XXI. 16–25, AND I SAM. I.–IV.

THE book of Judges does not, as we see, contain the history of all the judges. But as with Samuel a new state of things begins, and as the life of Eli is so bound up with that of Samuel that the two cannot be separately told, the book of Samuel commences with an account of that retribution which fell on Eli and his house, and closed the epoch of the judges. For in the person of Eli this mode of governing by judges received its last trial, and though Samuel also was a judge, and the most efficient of the whole line, the office had been condemned in Eli. Eli had every advantage to make it admirable and adequate. How he became a judge originally, by what deeds of personal valour or victory

over Israel's foes we do not know—but having become a judge by his own merit, he was also a priest by birth, and if ever the office had a chance of fitting itself to the Theocracy, and becoming the permanent form by which the Theocracy was to be worked, it was now, when the civil and ecclesiastical power met in one man, and when personal merit and hereditary standing, sanctity of character and political vigour were all combined in the single person of Eli. But with all his virtues and natural advantages he had one great fault. He was for his own part attentive to his duties and interested in the people, taking his seat where he could see and be seen, speak and be spoken to by the worshippers. His one exclamation when the terrible message was delivered by Samuel, "It is the Lord, let him do what seemeth him good," reveals an enviable state of mind, a submissiveness which could not be picked up on a sudden, but must have been wrought in him by a long thoughtfulness about God's ways, and a real godliness of disposition.

He was a man of extraordinary magnanimity, never resenting that God should speak to him, the aged priest, through a prattling child that did not know God's voice when he heard it. He was a man not only mild and kindly when it cost him nothing to be so, as in the case of Hannah, but able to cherish one who was destined to supplant his own family, and who, to a smaller man than Eli was, must have seemed like the evil genius of his house.

The mixture of social festivity and the most solemn worship of God which we in modern times have only some few remaining traces of, is strikingly exhibited in the scene depicted here. Coming up to Shiloh only once a year, and meeting there friends from all parts of the country with whom there were few other means or opportunities of communicating, it was natural that the social entertaining, the mirthful eating and drinking, which is noted here, if it did not predominate, should at least form a very considerable element in the annual gathering. Shiloh would seem to have been at

all times addicted to amusements: situated among gentle slopes covered with vineyards, the population naturally indulged in those demonstrations of joy and cheerfulness which usually accompany the vintage. This season of festivity seems to have coincided with the annual religious gathering, and every evening the gardens round Shiloh were thronged with gay companies of girls, dancing and merry-making. It was thus they proved so easy a prey to the Benjamites when their tribe was so reduced that they had to come and carry off by force some of these dancers to be wives to them—as many of you will remember that the Romans did in a similar emergency. And it was therefore not so unreasonable in Eli as at first sight it would appear, to apprehend that a woman coming from one of those somewhat riotous entertainments, or, as the narrative expressly says, "after they had eaten and drunk," might not be in a state to worship: that her red eyes and somewhat wild or disturbed expression of face, and her unconscious

gestures and the voiceless movement of her lips were symptomatic of anything but devoutness. Yes, as we read further on in the narrative, women in a worse plight than he supposed Hannah to be in found their way into this house of God, and thought they did God service by offering to Him through His priests that which was dearer to them than life itself. There was need certainly that Eli should be suspicious of the worshippers while the priests themselves, his own sons, the men washed and purified with all ceremonial inventions, and the models of sanctity to the people, turned the license of the season and the fanaticism of the worshippers to their own licentious purposes, and polluted God's worship with the most shameful iniquities.

This was the blot on Eli's life which brought so terrible a doom—a doom which made both the ears tingle of whomsoever heard it. He was a good man of the easy type; the kind of man who makes an admirable servant, who does his duty to perfection so long as his duty

merely troubles himself, but who has not force of character to interfere with others; to command, to regulate the conduct of others, to incur the ill-will of others. He had no wicked intentions, no godless practices like his sons; he was a pure-minded, amiable, sincere, gentle, well-disposed man; but it was his misfortune to be in a position which required other qualities besides these, and which he had not. He could control himself, but not others. He would grieve over his sons, but not correct them. He could speak seriously to them, but could not enforce his words. He recognised the abuses which were being introduced into God's worship, but he continued day by day to delay cleansing the house of God, trusting to circumstances, or time, or chance, or anything, to do what he himself could not find nerve to do. An amiable indolence overspread his whole nature; he would be a delightful man to talk with, but most disappointing to have to do with: a man ever ready to do pleasant things, but never able to do disagreeable things. He was

one of the men who have great faith in the power of things to right themselves, in the virtue of leaving things alone, of letting nature take its course. Accordingly he let his own life and fortunes drift and become entangled with the wreck of other men's misdeeds, and so came to the end he did.

This then is an instance in which we may read the calamitous result of a merely passive life, of refusing to arrest or mend the evil practices around us, of conniving at sin which it is our business to put an end to; of contenting ourselves with keeping our own hands clean. For the fact is that not interfering when we ought to interfere is the surest way to be entangled with the results of those very sins, and the fate of those very sinners from whom we wish to keep separate—a lesson which our own country is now learning from its past treatment of Ireland. By many natural ties men are bound to us, and while we take the benefit of their service, or the pleasure of their affection, or any advantage their society brings, it is

cowardly and unjust, and besides impossible, to shake off any responsibility regarding their conduct. Parents who, like Eli, are afraid to lose the affection of their children, and who pretend not to see their growing faults, must know that this can only end badly. Eli did not see his life written out, a completed story; after the retribution fell, he had no time to revise and remodel it—as God said, "When I begin, I will also make an end." We also are living out our lives day by day, and each day are coming nearer to that sudden retribution which will finish all, and reveal the completeness and at once show the value of our life. It will show the pitiful and utter incompetence of all mere resolutions of amendment, the barrenness of mere good intentions and amiable dispositions; it will show how diametrically different are the veritable things we do, have done, and go on doing, from all that we have merely thought of doing and known to be right to do.

The character of Eli is far from uncommon, and a far larger amount of disaster is produced

in the world by such softness than by deliberate wickedness. There can be no more fatal guide to a man setting out in life than the instinct which chooses what is agreeable, and avoids everything that is harsh and difficult. Many a graceful, amiable, and well-intentioned youth has thus reached an end of infamy. The character which shrinks from all collision with other men, which cannot face obloquy, which shrinks from inflicting pain, not because it hurts other people so much as because it shakes their own nerves, which does all in its power to preserve the belief that this life is before all else for comfort and pleasure—this character is one of the most dangerous that wanders over this earth—dangerous for itself and dangerous for others also. Its apparent gentleness and goodness in the beginning, arise mainly from the gaiety and good spirits of youth, and from the desire to stand well with everybody, which very desire will ultimately entangle him with sin, and devastate his life. There are times in most lives when the current of circumstances sets strongly

towards sin, and when a man will certainly sin if his rule of life has been to avoid all that is painful, and to choose what will for the time give him security and ease. The life of such a man, however promising it seems in youth, becomes weighted and entangled by a constantly accumulating burden of difficulties and sorrowful remembrances, and unavailing regrets, until at last he is, like Eli, almost glad to hear that what he has so long seen must be a losing game is over, and that his doom is imminent. Times have been given him when, by a little effort, and by some self-denial, he might have recovered himself and started afresh, with possibly a sullied fame among men, but with a conscience cleansed from offence, and with the strength which comes from the consciousness of having for once acted nobly and with energy: but these times are all gone by, and he now merely awaits the end, heartless and without hope.

The vices which Eli suffered in his sons did not terminate in themselves, but had the effect

of making the worship of God abhorrent and despicable in the country. This may be done not only by the sensuality and greed of the clergy, but in other ways as well. These sins are very apparent, and the world is very quick to detect and resent in the clergy the grasping spirit and keen eye to worldly interests which it counts meritorious, or at least very pardonable, in other men. But other sins work more unobservedly, but not less certainly, to the same end of deadening the spirit of worship, and bringing God's service into contempt. The carelessness about truth, which merely preaches traditionary opinions, does so: the indolent formality which accepts stereotyped phrases of devotion or of sentiment, and puts no meaning or spirit into them; the wrangling and hastiness in discussion which show that love of party is stronger than love of truth; the preaching of doctrine which lowers men's ideas of God and of righteousness — these and many such things make the worship of God contemptible. It is of course a weakness to judge of the

service of God by those who by profession conduct His worship, but it is a weakness into which men continually fall. In this age those who serve in God's house are not allowed to be ignorant of their shortcomings and peculiar vices; the weakness, the narrowness, the ignorance, the obstructiveness, the worldliness of the clergy are much dwelt upon by our public censors: unfortunately many of those who do so dwell upon clerical infirmities and vices, are thus excusing themselves from taking any zealous part in religious worship and work. But this is perhaps the greatest responsibility the clergy of any country have to bear, that they are taken as samples of what the religion they profess is worth—and it is perhaps the greatest difficulty which we in our own time have to solve, viz.: how to live a really unworldly life in an age and society which will not suffer any marked external separation from the world, which hates and very justly hates all those old modes of separation by celibacy, monasticism, priestly separation from social

intercourse. It is an age which says to its clergy, You must do all that we do, and yet be quite different from us, you must move about in society, buy and sell, marry and bring up families just like the rest of us, but you must be throughout superior to the world, and to all the temptations these connections with the world bring. This age, I say, sets this task to its clergy, and then stands by and notes, not without triumph, how they fall short of it.

In God's message to Eli, He traces the sins of the priesthood to their root. "I chose you to be priests, to serve me, and ye have made yourselves fat with the offerings of my people." To be truly servants of God, this is the difficulty; to put aside as illegitimate everything which merely forwards our own interests; to abstain from cherishing purely personal hopes; to sink our own cause, and prospects, and will in the cause of God; to be truly in God's hand to be used as He wills; to come back day by day and wait for orders from Him; to acquire thus the understanding of what He

seeks to do in the world, and gradually to abjure every other thought than how to accomplish this; to be consecrated and to be faithful, this is what God requires of us all; this is what no man who knows God will rest without doing; but this is what needs the discipline of a life to accomplish. How far, my friends, are you accomplishing this? How far are you making it your aim—for you are called to be priests to God—you are called to identify your interests with His cause, to know no other way or will but His—and to this *God will bring you*, so that the hopes and plans of merely selfish advancement are just so much affliction and sorrow sown for you; the eager ambitions that burn in your hearts and stimulate you to work are but driving you off your road, and from them all you must return to the simplicity of God's servants who care only to please Him. It is when we have no aim but this, that we find rest. It is when this is the guiding star that leads us to select this or that path in life, that we are filled with confidence, and know our-

selves God's children. It matters little in what forms of life our self-seeking shows itself, whether in the gross vices of Hophni and Phinehas, or in the elegant triflings of a modern priesthood, or in the respectabilities and charities of a life which, for our own character's sake, we wish to keep pure and high; it matters very little what we are on the surface, if at bottom we are self-seeking—and he who has not tried to rid himself of this first and last root of sin, knows not how deep it has struck, and what myriad forms it can put on. It is the starting from self which is wrong, no matter whether selfish consideration leads us to do a right or a wrong thing. Year after year we go on trying to improve our character, to become bigger, stronger, higher men, and we find our efforts are mostly in vain, and gradually it dawns upon us that the reason why they are in vain is that we are striving to love God for our own sake, striving to do God's will not simply because it is God's will, but because we know we shall be worthier persons if we do it; striving

in short to live a new life with an old heart. Everything doubles back upon self; self is our centre and our object, and all is wrong with us till God is our object, till we truly, simply, and directly love Him, so that we are drawn by that love to all that is good.

The final catastrophe to which the guilty career of these priests led was the taking of the ark of God by the Philistines. The taking of the ark into the battle was an act of superstition—it showed that the Israelites had, as a people, sunk to the level of the heathen who believed in images and fetishes. The sin of taking the ark into battle, consisted in the ignorance of God it displayed, the unbelief that could not believe God was present with them anywhere except where the ark was—an unbelief which, like Micah's, cut at the roots of all spiritual religion, and the proper corrective of which was to let the ark itself be taken by the Philistines, although this might seem to be the departure of God Himself from among them, and was in truth the outward symbol of

one of the saddest periods in the history of Israel—for Israel without its God was nothing; other nations might hope to win their own without God, but in Israel all hope was quenched when their King thus showed His displeasure.

But while God punishes the existing priesthood, He adds a promise which must have kept the people hopeful through this dark time of desertion: "I will raise me up a faithful priest, that shall do according to that which is in mine heart." God showed the people that they would not always be misled and corrupted —that God was concerned in His worship as well as themselves, and that for His own honour He would cleanse His house and appoint an efficient priest who would bless His people with all that He intended for them. This promise was fulfilled, first of all in Samuel, who, though not of the priestly line, did serve in the house of God and offered sacrifice by an exceptional and special consecration. And though the priesthood was afterwards restored to the hereditary line, this period must have taught

thoughtful Israelites that the greatest blessings must come through a natural priesthood, through men who were by their disposition, though not by birth, fitted for the office, and must thus have given them some preparation of mind to understand the great Priest of an unpriestly line when He came.

The special importance then of this part of the narrative lies in the light it throws on the reason and principles of the inauguration of a new era. It is to Samuel, and his preparation for his future work, that the reader's attention naturally turns—partly, no doubt, because of the relief one feels in turning from the gross godless men to the innocent little child in his clean white dress and miniature ephod, running after Eli through the house of God, and imitating all his priestly actions. Eli seems to have taken to him at once; as often one sees an old man clinging to a child. Even before his birth it was his blessing that gave Hannah hope of a child, and from the first, Eli, by an unconscious fascination, which

you sometimes see linking two lives together, was drawn to the little boy, and probably lived greatly in these sad days in his company, finding oblivion of his sons' wickedness in his innocent prattle, and gradually transferring to him all the hope which once had centred in his own children. There may have been in Eli's mind some premonition of the future greatness of Samuel; a something about the child which taught him that God meant to do great things by him; so that while to us the terror of the message seems to be increased by the unconscious child being made the bearer of it, to Eli it may have softened the blow. In the fresh innocent child, he sees the symbol of a new unsullied hopeful epoch. As his mind dwelt on the manner in which this child had been brought into the world, how he was the answer to the prayer of one woman whose life had been made bitter by the taunts of the prosperous, but who, through her sorrows, had learned to trust in the Lord, as he heard the thanks-

giving of Hannah and saw how she reasoned from her own experience to the great principles on which God ever acts, how not her misery only, but the miseries of each and all of His people, is ever before Him; and as he saw Samuel grow up, a root out of a dry ground, as if God Himself had given him, as he marked his incorruptible ways, his right-mindedness even as a child, he saw that amidst all the feebleness and corruption of the best of men there was still hope, and that even when God's own ordinances seemed to be worse than useless, God's grace could create channels for itself. In Samuel, the asked of God, there is a type of the readiness with which God can provide men for His service; men different from and unaffected by the times in which they live; men who can grow up pure amidst corruption, who can shake off the ignorance of their teachers and rise above all their contemporaries—men for whom you cannot account on ordinary principles, whom you cannot trace to ordinary causes,

who are as truly sent by God as if they were sons of a Virgin or of a Hannah. And in this fact is our hope for our country, for the world, and for the Church; we may very much doubt whether there are at work any natural laws which make it quite certain that to the end men strong enough for every emergency will arise. Continually you hear lamentations over the decay of intellect and power among those who manage our affairs, and it is not evident to those who look most narrowly into these things that there are causes at work which will to the end, and inevitably, produce a series of God-fearing, right-minded, self-dedicating men. But He who in the time of Israel's disobedience said: "I will raise up a priest for myself, who will do all that is in mine heart," has in these last times, in the sending of His Son, given us such a fulfilment of this promise that in it we see a pledge of His constant remembrance of His people, and of His sufficiency for all their need. If any of you are not finding in

religion all you could expect, if the God revealed is not great enough to command your worship, if there is not proceeding from Him to you such influences as truly strengthen and elevate your spirit, and if because of the little that finds its way from God to yourself you are thinking that the world is left very much to itself, and may suffer a decay of all righteousness and mercy, then it should be your business to revise your belief in presence of this promise, and to make up your mind whether it has really been fulfilled, whether, in Christ, God has not given you a Priest through whom, if only you will yield to Him, He will utter the whole fulness of Divine wisdom and love, and through whom He will do for you and for all who can be brought under His influence, all that is in His heart.

VII.

THE BLESSINGS OF THE TRIBES.

"*All these are the twelve tribes of Israel: and this is it that their father spake unto them, and blessed them; every one according to his blessing he blessed them.*"—Gen. xlix. 28.

"*When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel. For the Lord's portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance.*"—Deut. xxxii. 8, 9.

The Blessings of the Tribes.

GEN. XLVIII. XLIX. DEUT. XXXIII. AND JUDGES V.

JACOB'S blessing of his sons* marks the close of the patriarchal dispensation. Henceforth the channel of God's blessing to man does not consist of one person only, but of a people or nation. It is still *one seed*, as Paul reminds us, a unit that God will bless, but this unit is now no longer a single person—as Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob—but one people, composed of several parts, and yet one whole; equally representative of Christ, as the patriarchs were, and of equal effect every way in receiving God's

* This lecture, which attempts to characterise the tribes and show their relation to one another in accordance with the prophetic utterance of Jacob, seems to find a suitable place in connection with the period of the judges, in which they settled down in their own places, and in which, as is manifest from Deborah's song, they still showed very distinctive characteristics.

blessing and handing it down until Christ came. The Old Testament Church, quite as truly as the New, formed one whole with Christ. Apart from Him it had no meaning, and would have had no existence. It was the promised seed, always growing more and more to its perfect development in Christ. As the promise was kept to Abraham when Isaac was born, and as Isaac was truly the promised seed—in so far as he was a part of the series that led on to Christ, and was given in fulfilment of the promise that promised Christ to the world—so all through the history of Israel we must bear in mind that in them God is fulfilling this same promise, and that they are the promised seed in so far as they are one with Christ. And this interprets to us all those passages of the prophets regarding which men have disputed whether they are to be applied to Israel or to Christ: passages in which God addresses Israel in such words as, "Behold my servant," "mine elect," and so forth, and in the interpretation of which it has been thought sufficient proof

that they do not apply to Christ, to prove that they do apply to Israel; whereas, on the principle just laid down, it might much more safely be argued that because they apply to Israel, therefore they apply to Christ. And it is at this point—where Israel distributes among his sons the blessing which heretofore had all lodged in himself—that we see the first multiplication of Christ's representatives; the mediation going on no longer through individuals, but through a nation; and where individuals are still chosen by God, as commonly they are, for the conveyance of God's communications to earth, these individuals, whether priests or prophets, are themselves but the official representatives of the nation.

As the patriarchal dispensation ceases, it secures to the tribes all the blessing it has itself contained. Every father desires to leave to his sons whatever he has himself found helpful, but as they gather round his dying bed, or as he sits setting his house in order, and considering what portion is appropriate for each,

he recognises that to some of them it is quite useless to bequeath the most valuable parts of his property, while in others he discerns a capacity which promises the improvement of all that is entrusted to it. And from the earliest times the various characters of the tribes were destined to modify the blessing conveyed to them by their father. The blessing of Israel is now distributed, and each receives what each can take; and while in some of the individual tribes there may seem to be very little of blessing at all, yet, taken together, they form a picture of the common outstanding features of human nature, and of that nature as acted upon by God's blessing, and forming together one body or Church. A peculiar interest attaches to the history of some nations,* and is not altogether absent from our own, from the precision with which we can trace the character of families, descending often with the same unmistakable lineaments from father to son for many genera-

* Merivale's *Romans under the Empire*, vi. 261.

tions. One knows at once to what families to look for restless and turbulent spirits, ready for conspiracy and revolution; and one knows also where to seek steady and faithful loyalty, public spiritedness, or native ability. And in Israel's national character there was room for the great distinguishing features of the tribes, and to show the richness and variety with which the promise of God could fulfil itself wherever it was received. The distinguishing features which Jacob depicts in the blessings of his sons, are necessarily veiled under the poetic figures of prophecy, and spoken of as they would reveal themselves in worldly matters; but these features were found in all the generations of the tribes, and displayed themselves in things spiritual also. For a man has not two characters, but one; and what he is in the world, that he is in his religion. You see this in our own country, how the forms of worship, and even the doctrines believed, and certainly the modes of religious thought and feeling, depend on the natural character, and the natural

character on the local situation of the respective sections of the community. No doubt in a country like ours, where men so constantly migrate from place to place, and where one common literature tends to mould us all to the same way of thinking, you do get men of all kinds in every place; yet even among ourselves the character of a place is generally still visible, and predominates over all that mingles with it. Much more must this character have been retained in a country where each man could trace his ancestry up to the father of the tribe, and cultivated with pride the family characteristics, and had but little intercourse, either literary or personal, with other minds and other manners. As we know by dialect and by the manners of the people when we pass into a new country, so must the Israelite have known by the eye and ear when he had crossed the county frontier, when he was conversing with a Benjamite, and when with a descendant of Judah. We are not therefore to suppose that any of these utterances of Jacob are mere geographical

predictions, or that they depict characteristics which might appear in civil life, but not in religion and the Church, or that they would die out with the first generation.

In these blessings, therefore, we have the history of the Church in its most interesting form. In these sons gathered round him, the patriarch sees his own nature reflected piece by piece, and he sees also the general outline of all that must be produced by such natures as these men have. The whole destiny of Israel is here in germ, and the spirit of prophecy in Jacob sees and declares it. It has often been remarked * that as a man draws near to death, he seems to see many things in a much clearer light, and especially gets glimpses into the future, which are hidden from others.

"The soul's dark cottage battered and decayed,
Lets in new light through chinks that time hath made."

Being nearer to eternity, he instinctively measures things by its standard, and thus comes nearer a just valuation of all things be-

* Plato, *Repub.* i. 5, &c.

fore his mind, and can better distinguish reality from appearance. Jacob has studied these sons of his for fifty years, and has had his acute perception of character painfully enough called to exercise itself on them. He has all his life long had a liking for analyzing men's inner life, knowing that when he understands that, he can better use them for his own ends; and these sons of his own have cost him thought enough over and above that sometimes penetrating interest which a father will take in the growth of a son's character; and now he knows them thoroughly, understands their temptations, their weaknesses, their capabilities, and as a wise head of a house, can, with delicate and unnoticed skill, balance the one against the other, ward off awkward collisions, and prevent the evil from destroying the good. This knowledge of Jacob prepares him for being the intelligent agent by whom God predicts in outline the future of His Church.

One cannot but admire, too, the faith which enables Jacob to apportion to his sons the

blessings of a land which had not been much of a resting-place to himself, and regarding the occupation of which his sons might have put to him some very difficult questions. And we admire this dignified faith the more, on reflecting that it has often been very grievously lacking in our own case—that we have felt almost ashamed of having so little of a present tangible kind to offer, and of being obliged to speak only of invisible and future blessings; to set a spiritual consolation over against a worldly grief; to point a man whose fortunes are ruined to an eternal inheritance; or to speak to one who knows himself quite in the power of sin of a remedy which has often seemed illusory to ourselves. Some of us have got so little comfort or strength from religion ourselves, that we have no heart to offer it to others; and most of us have a feeling that we should seem to trifle were we to offer invisible aid against very visible calamity. At least we feel that we are doing a daring thing in making such an offer, and can scarce get over the desire

that we had something to speak of which sight could appreciate, and which did not require the exercise of faith. Again and again the wish rises within us that to the sick man we could bring health as well as the promise of forgiveness, and that to the poor we could grant an earthly, while we make known a heavenly, inheritance. One who has experienced these scruples, and known how hard it is to get rid of them, will know also how to honour the faith of Jacob, by which he assumes the right to bless Pharaoh—though he is himself a mere sojourner by sufferance in Pharaoh's land, and living on his bounty—and by which he gathers his children round him and portions out to them a land which seemed to have been most barren to himself, and which now seemed quite beyond his reach. The enjoyments of it, which he himself had not very deeply tasted, he yet knew were real; and if there were a look of scepticism, or of scorn, on the face of any one of his sons; if the unbelief of any received the prophetic utterances as the ravings of delirium,

or the fancies of an imbecile and worn-out mind going back to the scenes of its youth, in Jacob himself there was so simple and unsuspecting a faith in God's promise, that he dealt with the land as if it were the only portion worth bequeathing to his sons, as if every Canaanite were already cast out of it, and as if he knew his sons could never be tempted by the wealth of Egypt to turn with contempt from the land of promise. And if we would attain to this boldness of his, and be able to speak of spiritual and future blessings as very substantial and valuable, we must ourselves learn to make much of God's promise, and leave no taint of unbelief in our reception of it.

And often we are rebuked by finding that when we do offer things spiritual, even those who are wrapped in earthly comforts appreciate and accept the better gifts. So it was in Joseph's case. No doubt the highest posts in Egypt were open to his sons; they might have been naturalized, as he himself had been, and, throwing in their lot with the land of their adoption,

might have turned to their advantage the rank their father held, and the reputation he had earned. But Joseph turns from this attractive prospect, brings them to his father, and hands them over to the despised shepherd-life of Israel. One need scarcely point out how great a sacrifice this was on Joseph's part. So universally acknowledged and legitimate a desire is it to pass to one's children the honour achieved by a life of exertion, that states have no higher rewards to confer on their most useful servants than a title which their descendants may wear. But Joseph would not suffer his children to risk the loss of their share in God's peculiar blessing, not for the most promising openings in life, or the highest civil honours. If the thoroughly open identification of them with the shepherds, and their profession of a belief in a distant inheritance, which must have made them appear madmen in the eyes of the Egyptians, if this was to cut them off from worldly advancement, Joseph was not careful of this, for resolved he was that, at any cost, they

should be among God's people. And his faith received its reward; the two tribes that sprang from him received about as large a portion of the promised land as fell to the lot of all the other tribes put together.

You will observe that Ephraim and Manasseh were adopted as sons of Jacob. Jacob tells Joseph "they shall be mine," not my grandsons, but as Reuben and Simeon. No other sons whom Joseph might have were to be received into this honour, but these two were to take their place on a level with their uncles as heads of tribes, so that Joseph is represented through the whole history by the two populous and powerful tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. No greater honour could have been put on Joseph, nor any more distinct and lasting recognition made of the indebtedness of his family to him, and of how he had been as a father bringing new life to his brethren, than this, that his sons should be raised to the rank of heads of tribes, on a level with the immediate sons of Jacob. And no higher honour could

have been put on the two lads themselves than that they should thus be treated as if they were their father Joseph—as if they had his worth and his rank. He is merged in them, and all that he has earned is, throughout the history, to be found, not in his own name, but in theirs. It all proceeds from him; but his enjoyment is found in their enjoyment, his worth acknowledged in their fruitfulness. Thus did God familiarize the Jewish mind through its whole history with the idea, if they chose to think and have ideas, of adoption, and of an adoption of a peculiar kind, of an adoption where already there was an heir who, by this adoption, has his name and worth merged in the persons now received into his place. Ephraim and Manasseh were not received alongside of Joseph, but each received what Joseph himself might have had, and Joseph's name as a tribe was henceforth only to be found in these two. This idea was fixed in such a way, that for centuries it was steeping into the minds of men, so that they might not be astonished if God should in

some other case, say the case of His own Son, adopt men into the same rank as He, and let His estimate of the worth of His Son, and the honour He puts upon Him, be seen in the adopted. This being so, we need not be alarmed if men tell us that imputation is a mere legal fiction, or human invention; a legal fiction it may be, but in the case before us it was the never-disputed foundation of very substantial blessings to Ephraim and Manasseh; and we plead for nothing more than that God would act with us as here He did act with these two, that He would make us His direct heirs, make us His own sons, and give us what He who presents us to Him to receive His blessing did earn, and merits at the Father's hand.

We meet with these crossed hands of blessing frequently in Scripture; the younger son blessed above the elder—as was needful, lest grace should become confounded with nature, and the belief gradually grow up in men's minds that natural effects could never be overcome by

grace, and that in every respect grace waited upon nature. And these crossed hands we meet still; for how often does God quite reverse *our* order, and bless most that about which we had less concern, and seem to put a slight on that which has engrossed our best affection. It is so, often in precisely the way in which Joseph found it so; the son whose youth is most anxiously cared for, to whom the interests of the younger members of the family are sacrificed, and who is commended to God continually to receive His right-hand blessing, this son seems neither to receive nor to dispense much blessing; but the younger, less thought of, left to work his own way, is favoured by God, and becomes the comfort and support of his parents when the elder has failed of his duty. And in the case of much that we hold dear, the same rule is seen; a pursuit we wish to be successful in we can make little of, and are thrown back from continually, while something else into which we have thrown ourselves almost accidentally, prospers in our hand and blesses us.

Again and again, for years together, we put forward some cherished desire to God's right hand, and are displeased, like Joseph, that still the hand of greater blessing should pass to some other thing. Does God not know what is oldest with us, what has been longest at our hearts, and is dearest to us? Certainly he does: "I know it, my son, I know it," He answers to all our expostulations. It is not because He does not understand or regard your predilections, your natural and excusable preferences, that He sometimes refuses to gratify your whole desire, and pours upon you blessings of a kind somewhat different from those you most earnestly covet. He will give you the whole that Christ hath merited; but for the application and distribution of that grace and blessing you must be content to trust Him. You may be at a loss to know why He does no more to deliver you from some sin, or why He does not make you more successful in your efforts to aid others, or why, while He so liberally prospers you in one part of your condition, you get so much

less in another that is far nearer your heart; but God does what He will with His own, and if you do not find in one point the whole blessing and prosperity you think should flow from such a mediator as you have, you may only conclude that what is lacking there, will elsewhere be found more wisely bestowed. And is it not a perpetual encouragement to us that God does not merely crown what nature has successfully begun, that it is not the likely and the naturally good that are most blessed, but that God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty; and base things of the world and things which are despised hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are?

In Reuben, the first-born, conscience must have been sadly at war with hope, as he looked at the blind, but expressive, face of his father. He may have hoped that his sin had not been severely thought of by his father, or that the

father's pride in his first-born would prompt him to hide, though it could not make him forget it. Probably the gross offence had not been made known to the family. At least, the words "he went up," may be understood as addressed in explanation to the brethren. It may indeed have been that the blind old man forcibly recalling the long past transgression, is here uttering a mournful, regretful soliloquy, rather than addressing any one. It may be that these words were uttered to himself as he went back upon the one deed that had disclosed to him his son's real character, and rudely hurled to the ground all the hopes he had built up for his first-born. Yet there is no reason to suppose, on the other hand, that the sin had been previously known or alluded to in the family. Reuben's hasty, passionate nature could not understand that if Jacob had felt that sin of his deeply, he should not have shown his resentment; he had stunned his father with the heavy blow, and because he did not cry out and strike him in return, he thought him little hurt.

So do shallow natures tremble for a night after their sin, and when they find that the sun rises and men greet them as cordially as before, and that no hand lays hold on them from the past, they think little more of their sin — do not understand that fatal calm that precedes the storm. Had the memory of Reuben's sin survived in Jacob's mind all the sad events that had since happened, and all the stirring incidents of the emigration and the new life in Egypt? Could his father at the last hour, and after so many thronged years, and before his brethren, recall the old sin? He is relieved and confirmed in his confidence by the first words of Jacob, words ascribing to him his natural position, a certain conspicuous dignity too, and power such as one may often see produced in men by occupying positions of authority, though in their own character there be weakness. But all the excellence that Jacob ascribes to Reuben, serves only to embitter the doom pronounced upon him. Men seem often to expect that a future can be *given* to them

irrespective of what they themselves are, that a series of blessings and events might be prepared for them, and made over to them ; whereas every man's future must be made by himself, and is already in great part formed by the past. It was a vain expectation of Reuben to expect that he, the impetuous, unstable, superficial son, could have the future of a deep, and earnest, and dutiful nature, or that his children should derive no taint from their parent, but be as the children of Joseph. No man's future need be altogether a doom to him, for God may bless to him the evil fruit his life has borne ; but certainly no man need look for a future which has no relation to his own character. His future will always be made up of *his* deeds, *his* feelings, and the circumstances which *his* desires have brought him into.

The future of Reuben was of a negative, blank kind—"Thou shalt *not* excel;" his unstable character must empty it of all great success. And to many a heart since have these words struck a chill, for to many they are as a mirror

suddenly held up before them. They see themselves, when they look on the tossing sea, rising and pointing to the heavens with much noise, but only to sink back again to the same everlasting level. Men of brilliant parts and great capacity are continually seen to be lost to society by instability of purpose. Would they only pursue one direction, and concentrate their energies on one subject, they might become true heirs of promise, blessed and blessing; but they seem to lose relish for every pursuit on the first taste of success—all their energy seems to have boiled over and evaporated in the first glow, and sinks as the water that has just been noisily boiling, when the fire is withdrawn from under it. No impression made upon them is permanent: like water, they are plastic, easily impressible, but utterly incapable of retaining an impression; and therefore, like water, they have a downward tendency, or at the best are but retained in their place by pressure from without, and have no internal power of growth. And the misery of this character is often in-

creased by the *desire* to excel which commonly accompanies instability. It is generally this very desire which prompts a man to hurry from one aim to another, to give up one path to excellence when he sees that other men are making way upon another: having no internal convictions of his own, he is guided mostly by the successes of other men, the most dangerous of all guides. So that such a man has all the bitterness of an eager desire doomed never to be satisfied. Conscious to himself of capacity for something, feeling in him the excellency of power, and having that "excellency of dignity," or graceful and princely refinement, which the knowledge of many things, and intercourse with many kinds of people, have imparted to him, he feels all the more that pervading weakness, that greedy, lustful craving for all kinds of priority, and for enjoying all the various advantages which other men severally enjoy, which will not let him finally choose and adhere to his own line of things, but distracts

him by a thousand purposes which ever defeat one another.*

The sin of the next oldest sons was also remembered against them, and remembered apparently for the same reason—because the character was expressed in it. The massacre of the Shechemites was not an accidental outrage that any other of the sons of Jacob might equally have perpetrated, but the most glaring of a number of expressions of a fierce and cruel disposition in these two men. In Jacob's prediction of their future, he seems to shrink with horror from his own progeny—like her who dreamt she would give birth to a firebrand. He sees the possibility of the direst results flowing from such a temper, and, under God, provides against these by scattering the tribes, and thus weakening their power for evil. They had been banded together so as the more easily and securely to accomplish their murderous pur-

* The subsequent history of the tribe shows that the character of its father was transmitted. "No judge, no prophet, not one of the tribe of Reuben, is mentioned." (*Vide* Smith's Dictionary, *Reuben*.)

poses. "Simeon and Levi are brethren"—showing a close affinity, and seeking one another's society and aid, but it is for bad purposes; and therefore they must be divided in Jacob and scattered in Israel. This was accomplished by the tribe of Levi being distributed over all the other tribes as the ministers of religion. The fiery zeal, the bold independence, and the pride of being a distinct people, which had been displayed in the slaughter of the Shechemites, might be toned down and turned to good account when the sword was taken out of their hand. Qualities such as these, which produce the most disastrous results when fit instruments can be found, and when men of like disposition are suffered to band themselves together, may, when found in the individual and kept in check by circumstances and dissimilar dispositions, be highly beneficial.

In the sin, Levi seems to have been the moving spirit, Simeon the abetting tool, and in the punishment, it is the more dangerous tribe that is scattered, so that the other is left com-

panionless. In the blessings of Moses, the tribe of Simeon is passed over in silence; and that the tribe of Levi should have been so used for God's immediate service, stands as evidence that punishments, however severe and desolating, even threatening something bordering on extinction, may yet become blessings to God's people. The sword of murder was displaced in Levi's hand by the knife of sacrifice; their fierce revenge against sinners was converted into hostility against sin; their apparent zeal for the forms of their religion was consecrated to the service of the tabernacle and temple; their fanatical pride, which prompted them to treat all other people as the offscouring of the earth, was informed by a better spirit, and used for the upbuilding and instruction of the people of Israel. In order to understand why this tribe, of all others, should have been chosen for the service of the sanctuary and for the instruction of the people, we must not only recognise how their being scattered in punishment of their sin over all the land

fitted them to be the educators of the nation and the representatives of all the tribes, but also we must consider that the sin itself which Levi had committed, broke the one command which men had up till this time received from the mouth of God; no law had as yet been published, but that which had been given to Noah and his sons regarding bloodshed, and which was given in circumstances so appalling, and with sanctions so emphatic, that it might ever have rung in men's ears, and stayed the hand of the murderer. In saying, "At the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man," God had shown that human life was to be counted sacred. He Himself had swept the race from the face of the earth, but adding this command immediately after, He showed all the more forcibly that punishment was His own prerogative, and that none but those appointed by Him might shed blood—"Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord. To take private revenge, as Levi did, was to take the sword out of God's hand, and was to say that God was not

careful enough of justice, and but a poor guardian of right and wrong in the world; and to destroy human life in the wanton and cruel manner in which Levi had destroyed the Shechemites, and to do it under colour and by the aid of religious zeal, was to God the most hateful of sins. But none can know the hatefulness of a sin so distinctly as he who has fallen into it, and is enduring the punishment of it penitently and graciously, and therefore Levi was of all others the best fitted to be entrusted with those sacrificial symbols which set forth the value of all human life, and especially of the life of God's own Son. Very humbling must it have been for the Levite who remembered the history of his tribe, to be used by God as the hand of His justice on the victims that were brought in substitution for that which was so precious in the sight of God.

The blessing of Judah is at once the most important and the most difficult to interpret in the series. There is enough in the history of Judah himself, and there is enough in the sub-

sequent history of the tribe, to justify the ascription to him of all lion-like qualities—a kingly fearlessness, confidence, power, and success; in action a rapidity of movement and might that make him irresistible, and in repose a majestic dignity of bearing. As the serpent is the cognizance of Dan, the wolf of Benjamin, the hind of Naphtali, so is the lion of the tribe of Judah. He scorns to gain his end by a serpentine craft, and is himself easily taken in; he does not ravin like a wolf, merely plundering for the sake of booty, but gives freely and generously, even to the sacrifice of his own person; nor has he the mere graceful and ineffective swiftness of the hind, but the rushing onset of the lion—a character which, more than any other, men reverence and admire—"Judah, *thou* art he whom thy brethren shall praise"—and a character which, more any other, fits a man to take the lead and rule. If there were to be kings in Israel, there could be little doubt from which tribe they could best be chosen; a wolf of the tribe of Benjamin,

like Saul, not only hung on the rear of retreating Philistines and spoiled them, but made a prey of his own people, and it is in David we find the true king, the man who more than any other satisfies men's ideal of the prince to whom they will pay homage; — falling indeed into grievous error and sin, like his forefather, but like him also right at heart, so generous and self-sacrificing that men served him with the most devoted loyalty, and were willing rather to dwell in caves with him than in palaces with any other.

This kingly supremacy of Judah was here spoken of in words which have been the subject of as prolonged and violent contention as any others in the Word of God. "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come." These words are very generally understood to mean that Judah's supremacy would continue until it culminated or flowered into the personal reign of Shiloh; in other words, that Judah's sovereignty was to be perpetuated in the person

of Jesus Christ. So that this prediction is but the first whisper of that which was afterwards so distinctly declared, that David's seed should sit on the throne for ever and ever. It was not accomplished in the letter, any more than the promise to David was; the tribe of Judah cannot in any intelligible sense be said to have had rulers of her own up to the coming of Christ, or for some centuries previous to that date. For those who would quickly judge God and His promise by what they can see in their own day, there was enough to provoke them to challenge God for forgetting His promise. But in due time *the* King of men, He to whom all nations have gathered, did spring from this tribe; and need it be said that the very fact of His appearance proved that the supremacy had not departed from Judah? This prediction, then, partook of the character of very many of the Old Testament prophecies; there was sufficient fulfilment in the letter to seal, as it were, the promise, and give men a token that it was being accomplished, and yet

so mysterious a falling short, as to cause men to look beyond the literal fulfilment on which alone their hopes had at first rested, to some far higher and more perfect spiritual fulfilment.

But not only has it been objected that the sceptre departed from Judah long before Christ came, and that therefore the word Shiloh cannot refer to Him, but also it has been truly said that wherever else the word occurs it is the name of a town—that town, viz., where the ark for a long time was stationed, and from which the allotment of territory was made to the various tribes; and the prediction has been supposed to mean that Judah should be the leading tribe till the land was entered. Many objections to this naturally occur, and need not be stated. But it comes to be an inquiry of some interest, How much information regarding a personal Messiah did the brethren receive from this prophecy? A question very difficult indeed to answer. The word Shiloh means "peace-making," and if they understood this as a proper name, they must have thought of a

person such as Isaiah designates as the Prince of Peace—a name, it was, similar to that wherewith David called his son Solomon, in the expectation that the results of his own lifetime of disorder and battle would be reaped by his successor in a peaceful and prosperous reign. It can scarcely be thought likely, indeed, that this single term "Shiloh," which might be applied to many things besides a person, should give to the sons of Jacob any distinct idea of a personal Deliverer; but it might be sufficient to keep before their eyes, and specially before the tribe of Judah, that the aim and consummation of all lawgiving and ruling was peace. And there was certainly contained in this blessing an assurance that the purpose of Judah would not be accomplished, and therefore that the existence of Judah as a tribe would not terminate, until peace had been through its means brought into the world: thus was the assurance given, that the productive power of Judah should not fail until out of that tribe there had sprung that which should give peace.

But to us who have seen the prediction accomplished, it plainly enough points to *the* Lion of the tribe of Judah, who in His own person combined all kingly qualities. In Him we are taught by this prediction to discover once more the single Person who stands out on the page of this world's history as satisfying men's ideal of what their King should be, and of how the race should be represented;—the One who without any rival stands in the mind's eye as that for which the best hopes of men were waiting, still feeling that the race could do more than it had done, and never satisfied but in Him.

*Z*ebulun, the sixth and last of Leah's sons, was so called, because said Leah, "Now will my husband *dwell with me*" (such being the meaning of the name), "for I have borne him six sons." All that is predicted regarding this tribe is that his *dwelling* should be by the sea, and near the Phœnician city *Z*idon. This is not to be taken as a strict geographical definition of the tract of country occupied by *Z*ebu-

lun, as you will see if you compare it with the lot assigned to it and marked out in the book of Joshua; but though the border of the tribe did not reach to Zidon, and though it can only have been a mere tongue of land belonging to it that ran down to the Mediterranean shore, yet the situation ascribed to it is true to its character as a tribe that had commercial relations with the Phœnicians, and was of a decidedly mercantile turn. We find this same feature indicated in the blessing of Moses: "Rejoice, Zebulun, in thy *going out*, and Issachar in thy tents"—Zebulun having the enterprise of a seafaring community, and Issachar the quiet bucolic contentment of an agricultural or pastoral population: Zebulun always restlessly eager for emigration or commerce, for *going out* of one kind or other; Issachar satisfied to live and die in his own tents. It is still, therefore, character rather than geographical position that is here spoken of—though it is a trait of character that we all know to be singularly dependent on geographi-

cal position: we, *e.g.*, because islanders, having become the maritime power and the merchants of the world; not being shut off from other nations by the encompassing sea, but finding paths by it equally in all directions ready provided for every kind of traffic.

Zebulun, then, was to represent the commerce of Israel, its *outgoing* tendency; was to supply a means of communication and bond of connection with the world outside, so that through it might be conveyed to the nations what was saving in Israel, and that what Israel needed from other lands might also find entrance. In the Church also, this is a needful quality: for our well-being there must ever exist among us those who are not afraid to launch on the wide and pathless sea of opinion; those in whose ears its waves have from their childhood sounded with a fascinating invitation, and who at last, as if possessed by some spirit of unrest, loose from the firm earth, and go in quest of lands not yet discovered, or are impelled to see for themselves what till now they

have believed on the testimony of others. It is not for all men to quit the shore, and risk themselves in the miseries and disasters of so comfortless and hazardous a life; but happy the people which possesses from one generation to another, men who must see with their own eyes, and to whose restless nature the discomforts and dangers of an unsettled life have a charm. It is not the instability of Reuben that we have in these men, but the irrepressible longing of the born seaman, who *must* lift the misty veil of the horizon and penetrate its mystery. And we are not to condemn, even when we know we should not imitate, men who cannot rest satisfied with the ground on which *we* stand, but venture into regions of speculation, of religious thought which we have never trodden, and may deem hazardous. The nourishment we receive is not all native-grown; there are views of truth which may very profitably be imported from strange and distant lands; and there is no land, no province of thought, from which we may not

derive what may advantageously be mixed with our own ideas; no direction in which a speculative mind can go in which it may not find something which may give a fresh zest to what we already use, or be a real addition to our knowledge. No doubt men who refuse to confine themselves to one way of viewing truth—men who venture to go close to persons of very different opinions from our own, who determine for themselves to prove all things, who have no very special love for what they were native to and originally taught, who show rather a taste for strange and new opinions—these persons live a life of great hazard, and in the end are generally, like men who have been much at sea, unsettled; they have not fixed opinions, and are in themselves, as individual men, unsatisfactory and unsatisfied; but still they have done good to the community, by bringing to us ideas and knowledge which otherwise we could not have obtained. Such men God gives us to widen our views; to prevent us from thinking that we have the best of everything; to bring

us to acknowledge that others, who perhaps in the main are not so favoured as ourselves, are yet possessed of some things we ourselves would be the better of. And though these men must themselves necessarily hang loosely, scarcely attached very firmly to any part of the Church, like a seafaring population, and often even with a border running very close to heathenism, yet let us own that the Church has need of such—that without them the different sections of the Church would know too little of one another, and too little of the facts of this world's life. And as the seafaring population of a country might be expected to show less interest in the soil of their native land than others, and yet we know that in point of fact we are dependent on no class of our population so much for leal patriotism, and for the defence of our country: so one has observed that the Church also must make similar use of her Zebuluns—of men who, by their very habit of restlessly considering all views of truth which are alien to our own ways of thinking, have

become familiar with, and better able to defend us against, the error that mingles with these views.

Issachar receives from his father a character which few would be proud of or would envy, but which many are very content to bear. As the strong ass that has its stall and its provender provided can afford to let the free beasts of the forest vaunt their liberty, so there is a very numerous class of men who have no care to assert their dignity as human beings, or to agitate regarding their rights as citizens, so long as their obscurity and servitude provide them with physical comforts, and leave them free of heavy responsibilities. They prefer a life of ease and plenty, to a life of hardship and glory. They are not lazy nor idle, but are quite willing to use their strength so long as they are not overdriven out of their sleekness. They have neither ambition nor enterprise, and willingly bow their shoulders to bear, and become the servants of those who will free them from the anxiety of planning and

managing, and give them a fair and regular remuneration for their labour. This is not a noble nature, but in a world in which ambition so frequently runs through a thorny and difficult path to a disappointing and shameful end, this disposition has much to say in its own defence. It will often accredit itself with unchallengeable common sense, and will maintain that it alone enjoys life and gets the good of it. They will tell you they are the only true utilitarians, that to be one's own master only brings cares, and that the degradation of servitude is only an idea; that *really* servants are quite as well off as masters. Look at them: the one is as a strong, powerful, well-cared for animal, his work but a pleasant exercise to him, and when it is over never following him into his rest; he eats the good of the land, and has what all seem to be in vain striving for, rest and contentment: the other, the master, has indeed his position, but that only multiplies his duties; he has wealth, but that proverbially only increases his cares and the

mouths that are to consume it; it is *he* who has the air of a bondsman, and never, meet him when you may, seems wholly at ease and free from care.

Yet, after all that can be said in favour of the bargain an Issachar makes, and however he may be satisfied to rest, and in a quiet, peaceful way enjoy life, men feel that at the best there is something despicable about such a character. He gives his labour and is fed, he pays his tribute and is protected; but men feel that they ought to meet the dangers, responsibilities, and difficulties of life in their own persons, and at first hand, and not buy themselves off so from the burden of individual self-control and responsibility. The animal enjoyment of this life and its physical comforts may be a very good ingredient in a national character: it might be well for Israel to have this patient, docile mass of strength in its midst: it may be well for our country that there are among us not only men eager for the highest honours and posts, but a great multitude of men perhaps equally service-

able and capable, but whose desires never rise beyond the ordinary social comforts; the contentedness of such, even though reprehensible, tempers or balances the ambition of the others, and when it comes into personal contact rebukes its feverishness. They, as well as the other parts of society, have amidst their error a truth—the truth that the ideal world in which ambition, and hope, and imagination live is not everything; that the material has also a reality, and that though hope does bless mankind, yet attainment is also something, even though it be a little. Yet this truth is not the whole truth, and is only useful as an ingredient, as a part, not as the whole; and when we fall from any high ideal of human life which we have formed, and begin to find comfort and rest in the mere physical good things of this world, we may well despise ourselves. There is a pleasantness still in the land that appeals to us all; a luxury in observing the risks and struggles of others while ourselves secure and at rest; a desire to make life easy, and to shirk

the responsibility and toil that public-spiritedness entails. Yet of what tribe has the Church more cause to complain than of those persons who seem to imagine that they have done enough when they have joined the Church and received their own inheritance to enjoy; who are alive to no emergency, nor awake to the need of others; who have no idea at all of their being a part of the community for which, as well as for themselves, there are duties to discharge; who couch, like the ass of Issachar, in their comfort without one generous impulse to make common cause against the common evils and foes of the Church, and are unvisited by a single compunction that while they lie there, submitting to whatever fate sends, there are kindred tribes of their own being oppressed and spoiled?

There seems to have been an improvement in this tribe; an infusion of some new life into it. In the time of Deborah, indeed, it is with a note of surprise that, while celebrating the victory of Israel, she names even Issachar as

having been roused to action, and as having helped in the common cause—"the princes of Issachar were with Deborah, *even* Issachar;" but we find them again in the days of David, wiping out their reproach, and standing by him manfully. And there an apparently new character is given to them—"the children of Issachar, which were men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do." This quite accords, however, with the kind of practical philosophy which we have seen to be imbedded in Issachar's character. Men, they were, not distracted by high thoughts and ambitions, but who judged things according to their substantial value to themselves; and who were, therefore, in a position to give much good advice on practical matters—advice which would always have a tendency to trend too much towards mere utilitarianism and worldliness, and to partake rather of crafty politic diplomacy than of far-seeing statesmanship, yet trustworthy for a certain class of subjects. And here, too, they represent the same

class in the Church, already alluded to; for one often finds that men who will not interrupt their own comfort, and who have a kind of stolid indifference as to what comes of the good of the Church, have yet also much shrewd practical wisdom; and were these men, instead of spending their sagacity in cynical denunciation of what the Church does, to throw themselves into the cause of the Church, and heartily advise her what she *ought* to do, and help in the doing of it, their observation of human affairs, and political understanding of the times, would be turned to good account, instead of being a reproach.

Next came the eldest son of Rachel's handmaid, and the eldest son of Leah's handmaid, Dan and Gad. Dan's name, meaning "judge," is the starting point of the prediction—"Dan shall judge his people." This word "judge" we are perhaps somewhat apt to misapprehend; it means rather to defend than to sit in judgment on; it refers to a judgment passed between one's own people and their foes, and an

execution of such judgment in the deliverance of the people and the destruction of the foe. You are familiar with this meaning of the word by the constant reference in the Old Testament to God's *judging* His people; this being always a cause of joy as their sure deliverance from their enemies. So also it is used of those men who, when Israel had no king, rose from time to time as the champions of the people, to lead them against the foe, and who are therefore familiarly called "The Judges." From the tribe of Dan the most conspicuous of these arose, Samson, namely, and it is probably mainly with reference to this fact that Jacob so emphatically predicts of *this* tribe, "Dan shall judge his people." And notice the appended clause (as reflecting shame on the sluggish Issachar), "as one of the tribes of Israel," recognising always that his strength was not for himself alone, but for his country; that he was not an isolated people who had to concern himself only with his own affairs, but *one* of the tribes of Israel. The

manner, too, in which Dan was to do this was singularly descriptive of the facts subsequently evolved. Dan was a very small and insignificant tribe, whose lot originally lay close to the Philistines on the southern border of the land. It might seem to be no obstacle whatever to the invading Philistines as they passed to the richer portion of Judah, but this little tribe, through Samson, smote these terrors of the Israelites with so sore and alarming a destruction as to cripple them for years and make them harmless. You see, therefore, how aptly Jacob compares them to the venomous snake that lurks in the road and bites the horses heels; the dust-coloured adder that a man treads on before he is aware, and whose poisonous stroke is more deadly than the foe he is looking for in front. And specially significant did the imagery appear to the Jews, with whom this poisonous adder was indigenous, but to whom the horse was the symbol of foreign armament and invasion. The whole tribe of Dan, too, seems to have partaken of that

"grim humour" with which Samson saw his foes walk time after time into the traps he set for them, and give themselves an easy prey to him—a humour which comes out with singular piquancy in the narrative given in the book of Judges of one of the forays of this tribe, in which they carried off Micah's priest and even his gods.

But why, in the full flow of his eloquent description of the varied virtues of his sons, does the patriarch suddenly check himself, lie back on his pillows, and quietly say, "I have waited for thy salvation, O God?" Does he feel his strength leave him so that he cannot go on to bless the rest of his sons, and has but time to yield his own spirit to God? Are we here to interpolate one of those scenes we are all fated to witness when some eagerly watched breath seems altogether to fail before the last words have been uttered, when those who have been standing apart through sorrow and reverence, quickly gather round the bed to catch the last look, and when the dying man again collects himself and finishes his work? Probably Jacob,

having, as it were, projected himself forward into those stirring and warlike times he has been speaking of, so realizes the danger of his people, and the futility even of such help as Dan's when God does not help, that as if from the midst of doubtful war he cries, as with a battle cry, "I have waited for thy salvation, O God." His longing for victory and blessing to his sons far overshot the deliverance from Philistines accomplished by Samson. That deliverance he thankfully accepts and joyfully predicts, but in the spirit of an Israelite indeed, and a genuine child of the promise, he remains unsatisfied, and sees in all such deliverance only the pledge of God's coming nearer and nearer to His people, bringing with Him *His* eternal salvation. In Dan, therefore, we have not the catholic spirit of Zebulun, nor the practical, though sluggish, temper of Issachar; but we are guided rather to the disposition which ought to be maintained through all Christian life, and which, with special care, needs to be cherished in Church-life—a dis-

position to accept with gratitude all success and triumph, but still to aim through all at that highest victory which God alone can accomplish for His people. It is to be the battle-cry with which every Christian and every Church is to preserve itself, not merely against external foes, but against the far more disastrous influence of self-confidence, pride, and glorying in man—"For *thy* salvation, O God, do we wait."

Gad also is a tribe whose history is to be warlike, his very name signifying a marauding, guerilla-troop; and his history was to illustrate the victories which God's people gain by tenacious, watchful, ever-renewed warfare. The Church has often prospered by her Dan-like insignificance; the world not troubling itself to make war upon her. But oftener Gad is a better representative of the mode in which her successes are gained. We find that the men of Gad were among the most valuable of David's warriors, when his necessity evoked all the various skill and energy of Israel. "Of

the Gadites," we read, "there separated themselves unto David into the hold of the wilderness men of might, and men of war fit for the battle, that could handle shield and buckler, whose faces were like the faces of lions, and were as swift as the roes upon the mountains: one of the least of them was better than an hundred, and the greatest mightier than a thousand." And there is something particularly inspiriting to the individual Christian in finding this pronounced as part of the blessing of God's people—"a troop shall overcome him, *but he shall* overcome at the last." It is this that enables us to persevere—that we have God's assurance that present discomfiture does not doom us to final defeat. If you be among the children of promise, among those that gather round God to catch His blessing, you shall overcome at the last. You may now feel as if assaulted by treacherous, murderous foes, irregular troops, that betake themselves to every cruel deceit, and are ruthless in spoiling you; you may be assailed by so many and strange tempta-

tions that you are bewildered and cannot lift a hand to resist, scarce seeing where your danger comes from; you may be buffeted by messengers of Satan, distracted by a sudden and tumultuous incursion of a crowd of cares so that you are moved away from the old habits of your life amid which you seem to stand safely; your heart may seem to be the rendezvous of all ungodly and wicked thoughts, you may feel trodden under foot and overrun by sin, but, with the blessing of God, you shall overcome at the last. Only cultivate that dogged pertinacity of Gad, which has no thought of ultimate defeat, but rallies cheerfully and resolutely after every discomfiture.

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